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an interview about the making of a Kansas Democrat
edited and illustrated by Aimee Valentine

I come from a family of Democrats in Kansas. Believe it or not, back in the day, Kansas had two Democratic Congresspeople, a Democrat Governor, and maybe not majority, but in the State House, but it was darn close.

My father was State Finance Chair for a couple campaigns and State Democratic Chair too.

He was an attorney for a long time and then he was appointed a District Judge in the State of Kansas.

I have two younger sisters, and we'd sit around the kitchen table and talk about politics. It was fluid, and our parents were very validating in our opinions.
Kansas is Burning

It used to be a more... 

humane state. 

It's become very RED in the last 15-20 years. And that had a lot to do with Operation Rescue coming in.

There was a doctor in Wichita, I knew his daughter in college, named Doctor Tiller, and he was the ONE doctor, in probably the TRI-State area who performed late term abortion...
Operation Rescue decided to make their national headquarters in Wichita, Kansas, to try to shut him down....

Dr. Tiller was shot at, Dr. Tiller was threatened, but he continued to practice. EVEN when he was shot in the arm, he healed up and continued practicing.

Then, in 2009, someone from Operation Rescue, well - they won't ADMIT it was Operation Rescue, but it was someone from some anti-abortion, anti-choice organization...

...walked into Dr. Tiller's church, while he was taking collections, and shot and killed him.

It's the reason Kansas is burning.
ANGELS & BAPTISTS

...and then you have Fred Phelps and his family...

Fred was in law school with my dad. When he got out, he was a lawyer, and a Democrat. He actually ran for governor as a Democrat. All of a sudden, he turned and became a Baptist Minister. He built a baptismal pool in his backyard, which he claims is a tax write-off.

His children protest ANYTHING that has to do with homosexuality, even if it doesn't have anything to do with it, they make it ABOUT it. They protested Randy Shilts' funeral obviously. But also Bill Clinton's mother's funeral. And Hillary Clinton's father's funeral. NOW, they've taken to protesting military funerals, because, as THEY say-

die, fags
GOD HATES FAGS
US Army
GOD KILLING FAGS

FUNERAL
They were the ones in Laramie, do you remember?

In 1998, when Matthew Shepard was tied to a fence in Laramie, Wyoming, beaten, and left to die.

The Phelps' Baptist church went up and protested his funeral.

So people sewed sheets on Big butterfly wings, and stood in front of them, so the family wouldn't have to see them as they went into the church.
My Uncle John was a farmer, and he answered an AD in the newspaper that said they needed someone, a DEMOCRAT, to run for State House. He called and talked to them, and said, "You know, I think I want to do this." So he staged a campaign, and won, and became a State Legislator. Then, after awhile, he became Speaker of the House in Kansas.

And then he decided he wanted to run for Governor. And I can remember the day he came over to our house, and my mom and dad had spent the night before writing down ALL the reasons he shouldn't run... like he was going to be running against an INCUENT Republican who was very popular with business, and, you know, the voters. And then there was this PROGRESSIVE Democrat, and they thought he'd have a big uphill battle. They thought he'd have a big uphill battle against an incumbent, well-liked Republican. So I asked, "How was that meeting?"

Well, John came over, we sat down, we gave him ALL the reasons why we didn't think he should run, and he answered EACH ONE. And then we said, "Then you NEED to run."
I wanted to do-door-to-door, just like I had for McGovern, when I was 5.

I would walk up, and knock on the door, and somebody would open and say, "Oh! What a cute little girl. How are you?"

McGovern. He's running for president.

I'm here to give you some information about George McGovern.

I'm just educating them. I really enjoyed doing it.

It wasn't like they were using me... it was like Halloween!

It was really grassroots back then. You really were talking and touching.

In 1978, I was 11.
Nobody expected John Carlin to win.

It was election night, 1978, in November.

People dropped ballots in the ballot box...

...no "doot doot" on a computer.

Returns were COUNTED.

We didn't have a celebration party scheduled.

It was really by the seat of your pants.

So we all descend on Denny's, about 20 of us, at 2am, and there's only one waitress. And she looks at the cook and the manager and she says (gasp) I'm OUTTA here, I QUIT!

...and my younger sister Amy and I go back and grab coffee pots and we start pouring coffee. It was just so much fun to be involved like that.
THE LONG WAY AROUND

I started the first Young Democrats Club in my high school.

We would get together and kvetch about politics, talk about issues, or if there was a political campaign that needed help in our community...

We're just calling to let you know...

And then, on election night, yeah, it's not the proudest moment of my life, but we stole Republican signs out of yards.

...We'd do door-to-door, we'd do phone banking.
I ran for Student Body President my senior year, after two kids had gotten into the race: one, whose daddy owned Baskin Robbins, so he could hand out free ice cream coupons.

And the other one, whose daddy owned the skating rink, and he'd hand out free coupons for skating.

So I ran under the Communist ticket.

Oh, I put up a bunch of signs with sickles and hammers! And said Marxist things. I wanted to rile it up; yeah, it was a long way around. Nobody else understood it. It was the fall of 1984.

I remember we watched in Civics the Reagan/Mondale debate.

Reagan SAID he'd take a senility test because of the shooting.

And some guy in a truck hat stood up and said, "You fuckin' take a senility test, Debbie Bengtson!"

It was a long way around...
So I go to college, and I DON'T go to my father's alma mater, Kansas State. I go to University of Kansas, in Lawrence. HUGE DIFFERENCE.

I remember getting all my stuff packed into the car, and turning around, looking at the house I grew up in...

Debbie! my dad BOUNDED out of the front door, and I'm thinking this is going to be one of those tender father-daughter moments.

You know I'm proud of you, and I love you, but it's BREAKING my HEART you're not going to Kansas State.

I know.

But I WILL disinherit you if you register as a Republican when you get to Lawrence.

And THEN he gave me the name of a lawyer in case I get into trouble with protests.
At the time, they were doing Apartheid protests on campus.

My dad thought I would jump up and be part of that.

But I never was.

I always wanted to EDUCATE people. And I felt like the Apartheid protests on campus were a bunch of well-meaning people who weren't educating anybody on the issue.

And that, as a result, they weren't really making a difference.

They were JUST pissing people off. I didn't think that was effective.
I did join the Young Democrats my freshman year, but they were affiliated with the Communist and Socialist parties on campus.

Now, I don't mean to sound mean...

...but all these Communists would drag into these meetings with us, and I would just be like, What the fuck?

You've got to realize. Kansas is Kansas. It's a LOT different than the coast. When you're talking to people, you have to communicate on an ACCEPTABLE and FRIENDLY level they're going to be receptive to...

...and if you come out with some guy named "Boog" Hightberger, who dresses like Jesus, no one is gonna listen to you in the state of Kansas about issues that are important and matter.

"Boog" was head of the Communists at KU, and also a grad student. He later ran for the Lawrence City Council and even MAYOR, and won.

As a communist?

No! That's the thing. PHASE. And that's what I saw it as.

"This is a big, fat Phase, and I don't want to be affiliated with you workin' your shit out." I wanna EDUCATE people. So I quit the Democrats, and once the Communists and Socialists drifted away, I joined the Democrats again.
We joined forces with Planned Parenthood and with Emily's List.

We protested Domino's Pizza.

Because they're anti-choice?

Right. We got these t-shirts made and passed them out...

But the franchise are owned individually...

and this LITTLE GUY called me up and said,

Please, please stop.

And we did. Because, you know, we felt bad for him.

Anyway, that was college.
RUNNING DOWNHILL

After college, I worked on the gubernatorial campaign, and that was my Uncle John, he ran for a third term. In Kansas, you can only have two consecutive terms, but you can run again. So, he left office in '96, and ran in '98.

Fred Phelps ran against him, and a woman named Joan Finney in the gubernatorial primary.

I remember the day of the primary VERY well... I walked into the meeting we used to have everyday and said.

Let's pass the hat! Let's bet as to how much we're gonna win by!

Later in the day, we had a delegation of Japanese politicians come in, who were doing a tour of the U.S. They wanted to come and watch our victory.
We had this HUGE party venue, and a BAND, and speakers.

We were all in the upper levels of the hotel, watching the returns.

And my dad was sitting in a room with John.

My dad walked out and said:

It's over.
We've lost.

What do you mean?

No, that CAN'T be true.

We lost?

In the primary?

How's that POSSIBLE?

We just couldn't comprehend it. We were way too full of ourselves...

I remember looking at my dad, and looking at the returns and numbers...

...and I went to the bathroom and threw up.
Uncle John's campaign manager said, "Debbie, I know you like politics and I know you wanna continue... so - I got connections in South Dakota, or I got connections in Iowa. Where do you wanna go?"

So I went to Iowa, to a little place called Boone, and I lived with some Democrat activists, a couple who'd been kicked off their farm and were trying to kickstart their lives at age 65. I lived in their basement, and every week, the wife would throw the National Enquirer down and say, "I think you'd like to see THIS!"

I was trained at the Iowa Democratic Party Headquarters. "These are the goals we wanna set for every county!"

And THIS is what we want YOU to do! RAH, RAH, RAH!

I was all of 22 and I was TOTALLY enthusiastic."
So I went out to the county, and I gathered everybody in this small little cramped dirty headquarters in Boone, Iowa. I drew on this huge thermometer and said

THIS is how many absentee ballots we're gonna pull!

THIS is what we're gonna do!

and THIS is how we're gonna do it!

And they all just looked at me and shook their heads.

And I went home that day. My National Enquirer won't be reporting anything about that. And I got to say, I just cried.

But by the time I left, Iowa, a few weeks later, I had all these people pounding signs in yards, giving people rides to the polls, I had even managed this guy's City Council campaign. He was just too shy. He didn't wanna go door to door, and he didn't wanna make phone calls and EVERY day I'd say, Bob, pick up the phone and make phone calls. And he wouldn't.

I went back to Boone years later and visited with them again. It was just like family. And Bob was still a City Councilman.
So after Iowa, I went back to Kansas. I was in WAY over my head at an ad agency, and got fired... my fiancée had broken up with me... I had nothing to do...

DEEP END ➔

In '92, like '08, people came out from under ROCKS to support the Democratic Party. It was an upswell the Democrats had never seen, especially in Kansas City, Kansas. And our SIGNS kept getting stolen...

Imagine THAT. I put up a note:

A SIGN
for an hour of your TIME

We got a big response. People said "what can I do?"

EVERYONE can contribute.
EVERYONE has a place in politics.
I lined out all the different jobs: Door to door, phone banking, human billboard driving people to the polls.

So this big guy comes in...

What can I do?

Why not do a phone bank?

I've never done that before.

I'm doing it tonight, I'll show you how to do it!

After one or two phone calls he got up.

I'm real sorry, Debbie, but this is just not for me.

What's that "human billboard" thing?

So I got him set up on a busy corner in Kansas City, being a human billboard.
I had people who were doing that around town, and I'd check on them. How's it going? Do you need water? Do you need a break? And I went up to the big guy.

How's it going? Are you comfortable here?

Comfortable? I fuckin' LOVE this!! The guy who owns the sandwich shop keeps tryin' to kick me off, an' I told him FUCK YOU, this is public property!

And so—he found his 'niche' And we won.
I did meet President Clinton when I was working as a correspondence writer for the Vice President at the White House. There was a birthday party in the Indian Treaty Room of the Old Executive Office building.

There were probably 65 people in the room, all staffers, and he was about to get some nachos at the buffet table.

"Oh, my God. That's Bill Clinton. I really wanna go talk to him!"

"So go talk to him!"
I JUST WANT TO SAY THAT I AM SO PROUD TO BE WORKING HERE AND I WORKED SO HARD TO SEE THAT YOU GUYS WERE ELECTED, BECAUSE I JUST BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU WANT TO DO FOR THIS COUNTRY.

Anytime I think about meeting him, I DO get kinda teary...

He was over there, fixing himself up some nachos and I went over and tapped on his shoulder...

Mr. President?

There's a picture I have, torn and beaten up, at the bottom of a box.

I was 25.
When I was younger, I thought everything was black and white. But there are nuances, which I didn't understand until I got older and started seeing things up close.

I remember sitting in the parking lot with a friend. We were going to go to a movie, and the Lewinsky stuff had just come out. We missed the movie. We were SPEECHLESS, you know. Were we surprised he had an affair? People in power do that. Were we surprised that Congress was threatening to shut everything DOWN because they were a bunch of—no. I was not speechless because of that.

I was speechless because I had started working at USDA, on a Poverty initiative, and it had begun to see that this competitive grant program started by Clinton and Gore was really, really taking shape. Communities without paved roads or electricity were getting them.
There were things I learned about the South, and about Maryland that I was just SHOCKED at, when I looked at poverty rates and where the poverty was, how it was drawn on a map.

And we were starting to see improvement.

The Lewinsky thing came out and the Republicans in Congress just loved every DOG minute of it.

We’re gonna slow down THIS,

We’re gonna stop THAT.

We’re gonna stop talking about ANYTHING we need to pass in legislation or budgets, because we’re JUST gonna talk about Bill Clinton.

There will ALWAYS be people who stick their finger in the pie and say,

Oh, NO. You ain’t eatin’ that pie.

You can change the PROCESS all day long, but it’s not going to change the PEOPLE.
IT'LL RUIN YOUR DINNER

Do you evaluate Obama based on your ideals?

He's got a lot on his plate. There are times I get frustrated at the things he's done....

....but you know, on most days, he gets up and his personal secretary comes in and says, "Mr. President, I've got another SHIT SANDWICH for you to eat today."

And he has to keep eating shit sandwiches all day long.

I've worked at the White House.
I've worked with politicians.
I've worked in Congress as an intern.
I've worked at the State House.
I've done the campaigning.

I understand that whole mechanism. I'm done.