

Austin's Own Wordsmith

IF YOU'RE PUTTING WORDS INTO A POLITICIAN'S mouth, you'd better have something important to say, especially if the speeches belong to the first lady. And nobody knows about the power of the pen or about writing speeches quite like Austin native Charlie Fern.

Fern spent two years as chief speechwriter and press aide for Laura Bush, writing her letters, speeches, book introductions and columns on topics such as child advocacy and education, literacy, the arts, breast cancer awareness and women's rights. Fern wrote Mrs. Bush's United Nations Speech, the Radio Free Europe address to the people of Afghanistan and many of her formal comments in the aftermath of September 11. The first lady's favorite? Her commencement address to the University of Texas School of Library and Information Sciences—where she earned her master's degree.

In the beginning, Fern says, Mrs. Bush pulled out her red pen to edit adjectives or any flowery speech. But after a year, Fern knew exactly what words would ring true. "We talked about speeches ahead of time. She would give me a really good idea about what she wanted to say, and I had enough experience and existing material to pull something together that was pretty close to perfect," Fern says. "She might call me and say, 'What about this?' or 'Why did you write this?' And after the conversation she would usually be sufficiently satisfied with the material."

While Mrs. Bush is thought of as a good public speaker, her husband (who she calls "Bushie") is constantly critiqued for his style. Did the first lady ever join in on the criticism? "She took her mother-in-law's advice and never criticized her husband's speeches. The one time she did was in West Texas, when he was in his Senate campaign," Fern explains. "They were pulling into the garage after an event when he asked her how she liked his speech. She said she didn't like it very much, and he drove the car through the garage wall."

Fern's career has always been steeped in the search for perfect words. Prior to her years in Washington, Fern worked in the correspondence office for former Gov. Ann Richards writing greetings and proclamations. In 1995, George W. Bush took over the governorship, and despite the political party shift, Fern stayed on at the State Capitol.

When asked if the change in political ideology was confusing or caused dissonance, Fern says she's been around both parties her entire life. Her stepfather, Jimmy Turman (a "yellow dog Democrat") was

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speaker of the house in 1971. Her father is a longtime Republican. "Between the two of them, I ended up right down the road," Fern says.

Fern's White House days (and long nights) were packed with excitement and activity. She met Peggy Noonan, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, the Bush family, Larry King, Bill O'Reilly and even the cast of the television drama *The West Wing*. But her favorite celebrity encounter was meeting and singing with Fred Rogers of the famed children's show *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. "It was the most exciting personal moment," Fern says.

Eventually, Fern did make her way back home to Central Texas. She now runs her own communications consulting company, writing about her most treasured subjects of all—Texans and Texas culture and places. Does she miss the hustle and bustle of politics in Washington D.C.? "I'm really happy being at home in Austin. I'm giving my life back to Texas and my family."

—LAURIE DENT