



Jill Jacobs always wanted to be her own person. Joe Biden made that complicated — <https://bit.ly/3C7YuTC>

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Published 5 a.m. EDT Oct. 22, 2020

Editor's note: This story originally published in October 2020, and was updated after Joe Biden won the presidency in November.

All anyone could talk about that day were the yellow roses.

During the 1976-1977 school year, a courier delivered three dozen long-stemmed roses to the desk of St. Mark's High School's newest English teacher. The women in the office were buzzing about their beauty. The men commented on their exorbitant cost.

Even teen boys took notice.

When the teacher, for whom the flowers were for, opened the card, her cheeks blushed. Everyone already knew who Jill Jacobs' admirer was — some of them likely voted for him.

More than 40 years later, retired teachers and some former students can still recall the day Ms. Jacobs received those yellow roses. It represented an important chapter in the life of Jill Biden: her first year of teaching full-time, while also dating a gregarious U.S. senator whose ambitions included the White House.

During this year at St. Mark's, Jill began to establish her long career as an educator. Her kind gestures, tough grading and stylish outfits are still remembered by students decades later.

At 25, she also cautiously began to enter what would become her life as a mother and senator's wife, all while trying to find independence from her partner. She would continue to do so for years to come.

"She was always self-possessed," said Barbara Reilly, who taught English at St. Mark's for decades. "She always knew where she was going."

As a teacher and later a professor, Jill Biden's office had no photos of her husband, only of her children and grandchildren. Some students never knew who she was married to. When Jill defended her doctoral dissertation in education from the University of Delaware in 2007, she did so in her maiden name. Joe Biden was not allowed in the room out of concern that his presence would sway opinions.

Now that Jill Biden's husband has been elected president, that first year at St. Mark's offers a glimpse at the early life of a potentially historic first lady — one who plans to have a job outside the walls of the White House.

"I want my own money, my own career, my own identity," Jill Biden told *The News Journal* in 2007.

"He realizes," she said of Joe Biden, "that he's not my life and my love."

A banner year for the discovery of Middle English'

On the first day of teacher orientation, Barbara Reilly knew she liked her instantly. Jill Jacobs was smart and confident. She seemed like a natural teacher.

"And I thought, 'Merciful goodness she's beautiful,'" she laughed.

The two teachers formed a tight bond that year, particularly because the English department shared an office. It was a social group, where belly laughs were frequent. Reilly, already a veteran teacher at this point, recalled how quickly Jill impressed her fellow teachers.

"She asked for advice and she took advice," Reilly said.

Jill Biden, whom the Biden campaign did not make available for an interview in the fall, taught ninth and 10th grade English at the Catholic private school in Milltown. Her students learned to think critically of the words written by Dickens, Thoreau, and one of her favorites, Shakespeare.

Decades later, former students described their teacher with a certain glee. Several commented on how Jill Biden made them feel special, how they felt like she understood them. Others credited her with helping them get on the right path.

Not every student felt this way. On RateMyProfessor.com, she had a reputation for being a "tough" grader to several students.

Jill was not one to just stand in front of a blackboard and lecture, remembers Patricia Peacock, a former student and 1980 alum. She was good at engaging with students.

“Before you’re in high school, you’re talked down to,” Peacock said. “She was probably the first teacher who treated us like an equal — like adults. And it really makes an impression on you to be treated with respect, something you never had before.”

Beth Stickney, a 1980 St. Mark’s grad, said her English teacher helped nurture her love for writing. Her career has included teaching and freelance writing.

Knowing Stickney had an obsession with Norman Rockwell as a freshman, Jill encouraged her to write about the painter in an independent study. Stickney even made a presentation to the class. She also recalls meeting with the English teacher at “odd times” to talk about writing.

“I don’t know if she felt I was bored or what,” she said. “But the idea that she recognized something in me. She took extra time to cultivate my passion.”

Almost 40 years later, Stickney believes witnessing the bond of three of the department’s female teachers — Barbara Reilly, Pamela MacPherson and Jill Biden — had a deeper impact on her than she might have then realized.

She and her friends saw these women model professionalism while also incorporating women’s voices and perspectives into their work.

“But, frankly she was, like, really cool,” Stickney said.

At St. Mark’s, Jill recognized that she looked young, which is why she often wore her hair in a bun and attempted to portray “some gravitas,” as she wrote in her memoir.

Stickney can still recall Jill’s outfits: Her boots, her suede mini skirt, her leather blazer. And that blond hair. In many ways, Jill represented the cool, working woman that she and her friends aspired to be.

“We sort of saw her as this rebel chick,” Stickney said. “I certainly didn’t think she was becoming this appendage to this powerful senator. I saw her as this cool, independent, younger woman that this guy is captivated by.”

And boys fell in love with her. Reilly, the English teacher, recalled that she had never experienced so many male upperclassmen stopping by the department’s office pretending to seek “help” from their teachers. They were really there to see Ms. J.

“I was astonished to have so many young men interested in the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*,” she wrote years ago in a short essay for her family. “It was a banner year for the discovery of Middle English.”

At this point, Jill and Joe had been dating for about a year and the pressures of public life were beginning to seep in. In her first year as a teacher, she was also planning for graduate school while having to go through Biden’s office just to schedule a date.

“I knew that if I married Joe,” she wrote in her memoir, “I’d have to give up my apartment, the only space that was just for me. I’d have to quit my job for the boys’ sake, to give them the time to acclimate to having someone new in the house every day and not just on weekends.”

“And I’d have to become Jill Biden, senator’s wife. It was all too much.”

‘So much more than ‘lovely wives’

The students had whispered about Ms. J’s dating life for a while at this point — how she married and then divorced the man who founded Stone Balloon in Newark.

Then a student saw Joe and Jill together at a gas station. The news of the new English teacher dating Delaware’s widowed senator spread through the halls of St. Mark’s like a “firestorm,” Jill wrote in her memoir.

Being in a relationship with Joe Biden meant being in a relationship with Delaware and its politics. He was usually at some parade or school function or big gathering. And everyone knew his tragic story.

But Jill was not very interested in politics then, and it was never something her parents, registered Republicans, talked about at the dinner table. As a self-described introvert, campaign events overwhelmed her.

She preferred staying in the background. For a time, the thought of speeches made her sick.

The Washington Post reported this summer that Senate payroll records show Jill having worked as a “staff assistant” in Joe Biden’s office for about four months when they were dating, between 1975 and 1976. Jill didn’t mention this in her memoir, and a campaign aide told the Post that she answered phones when Biden’s office was “short-staffed.”

“I don’t want her to get into the political thing,” Joe Biden told The News Journal in 1977, shortly after their wedding. “Jill married me, my boys and the entire state of Delaware, you know. She’s entitled to a little privacy.”

Yet over the years — as she taught at Delaware psychiatric hospital, Concord High School, Brandywine High School and Delaware Technical Community College — Jill Biden found herself becoming a more-involved political spouse.

She got better at making speeches, even practicing with a speaking coach. She never lost that Philly accent.

Now, Jill Biden has transformed into one of the Biden campaign’s most valued surrogates (and bodyguards). It was in her old classroom at Brandywine High School where Jill Biden delivered one of the most poignant lines from the Democratic National Convention.

“How do you make a broken family whole?” she asked, looking directly into the camera. “The same way you make a nation whole.”

For some of her former students, they felt instantly transported back to high school as they watched their English teacher give the biggest speech of her life. Students messaged one another on Facebook, sharing photos of their awkward teenage selves at the time.

One alum got a Brandywine High School T-shirt out of her attic and wore it during Jill Biden’s speech.

“I don’t think we have a better representative of the state,” said Amy Diamond, a former Brandywine student, whom Jill Biden drove home each day after school. “Even a celebrity status hasn’t changed who she really is.”

Throughout the campaign, Jill Biden spoke openly about her desire to teach if she became first lady, which would make her the first to do so. As second lady, she was the first woman to continue to work.

Stickney, the former St. Mark’s student, described the idea of a working first lady as “f***** amazing.”

During a campaign fundraiser this fall, where attendees were mostly political spouses, Jill Biden spoke about the years of juggling being a mother, a teacher, a student and a senator’s wife. And her disdain for not being seen as her own person.

“You are leaders in your states, advisers, advocates, friends, confidants,” she said. “And so much more than ‘lovely wives.’

“Didn’t you just hate it when people called us that?”

Saying yes

As the fall turned into spring, Jill became more intertwined in the lives of the Biden family. She made dinner for Beau and Hunter and picked them up from school. Joe came to student productions of King Lear. Jill regularly stayed over on the weekends.

She began to see a future.

After coming home from events and dinners with Joe, Jill recalls in her memoir how she would throw herself onto the bed in her small apartment and stare at the divots in the ceiling.

"What am I doing," she asked herself.

During the course of 1977, Joe Biden had attempted to propose to Jill five times, a story that, decades later, has become an endearing anecdote they tell in interviews. But at the time, the idea of marriage overwhelmed her. She had prayed to never marry again.

Before boarding a plane for a 10-day trip in South Africa, Joe stopped by Jill's apartment. He was asking one last time, and he wanted an answer by the time he got home to Delaware.

"Saying yes meant changing the trajectory of my entire life at age twenty-five," Jill wrote. "On the other hand, saying no meant walking away from three people I had grown to love more than anyone."

Becoming Jill Biden would mean taking time off work to raise her children. Yet she returned to teaching. It would mean helping her husband run for president over the course of 30 years, each time returning to teaching.

It might mean becoming first lady, and once again, returning to teaching.

So, in the spring of 1977, as Joe Biden stood in her foyer waiting for an answer, Jill Jacobs said OK.

"I promise you," he said, holding her shoulders and looking at her in the eye, "your life will never change."

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