

Patty Duke for Governor?

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Approximately eight years ago, Coeur d'Alene city councilman Mike Kennedy approached friends to assess whether his aunt, Anna Pearce, also known by her stage name as Patty Duke, could develop a second career as a successful public officeholder in her adopted state of Idaho.

One's initial reaction might have been to wonder if he were serious? He was and with reason.

His aunt is not only a talented member of the nation's acting community, who achieved stardom at an early age with her unforgettable role in "The Miracle Worker," she also has long cared about public policy matters, is intelligent and can carry on an articulate conversation on almost any political subject.

Duke already had held the most challenging "political" office in Hollywood, that of president of the Screen Actor's Guild. One of her predecessors, a B-grade actor by the name of Ronald Reagan, used the post as his springboard into public office. By all accounts Duke carried out her role as a union president successfully and, indeed, it had whetted her political appetite.

Her nephew, Mike Kennedy, is not the only member of the family bitten by the political bug. Her son, Sean Astin, star of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, is up to his eyeballs in a friend's race for a congressional seat in California. Politics runs in the family.

While still in the process of becoming one of the few widely acknowledged talented members of Idaho's declining Democratic Party, Kennedy did not want bias for his aunt to color his assessment. He also felt it was imperative he offer his aunt a process for evaluating her prospects without diminishing her acting career or exposing her interest prematurely.

For several weeks, Kennedy and friends discussed the challenge. Had his aunt been a conservative in the mold of Ronald Reagan, the decision would have been much easier. Duke made it clear that if she were to run for any office it would be in her adopted state of Idaho, a state with which she and her husband have become deeply taken.

Anna Pearce (a.k.a, Patty Duke), though, is fundamentally a Democrat. She cares passionately about protecting the environment, and about the state fulfilling its constitutionally mandated role to fully support public education. Idaho, however, was well into its rightward drift at the time.

Could she overcome these perceived political handicaps, not to mention some candid confessions of problems early in her career laid out in her forthright best-selling autobiography? More importantly, how could she test her possible viability in a discreet manner?

Kennedy formulated a process that could achieve the goals, constrained as they might be. First, he correctly realized Duke was her own best spokesperson and salesperson. She had to go “on the road” around Idaho allowing folks across the state to get to know her while she in turn got to know Idaho in all its complexity.

Thought would be given to her speaking about her experiences as one of the stars of the Miracle Worker followed by a reception with proceeds going to Idaho’s Council on the Humanities. While visiting the state’s major communities, she would talk with newspaper editorial boards and call on key political cognoscenti.

At the end of this two-year roadshow, she would sit with family and friends to assess what she learned, determine whether a candidacy was feasible, and if it could be financed as well as won. (While well off by most people’s standards, she does not consider herself to be independently wealthy). Most importantly, she would decide what office she would seek basing the decision on where she could make a difference.

Nothing was ruled out n from county commission to a statewide office.

It says much about her innate political astuteness that when Mike laid out to her and her husband that there was a process to assess her prospects without unduly risking her current career, she decided that such an undertaking did not feel right to her. She instinctively understands one of the cardinal rules of politics, the rule of verisimilitude. It has to resemble the truth.

While she could carry off any acting role, she felt such a process would not be genuine, would ultimately be seen for what it was, and cause, at a minimum, a cloud over the sine qua non for any aspiring officeholder---credibility.

All of which goes to prove she might indeed be one good politician.

A native of Kellogg, a former teacher at Kootenai, and a former journalist, Chris served as press secretary to former Idaho Governor Cecil D. Andrus for ten years. He is the founding partner of the Gallatin Group, is now retired and he and his wife, Marcia, reside at Medimont.