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# Vicki Kennedy is quietly returning to her career, on her own terms

The Boston Globe



Suzanne Kreiter/Globe staff/File 2015

Since her husband's death in 2009, Vicki Kennedy has served as president of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate.

By **Mark Arsenault** GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 15, 2017

Give her some free time and a bit of wind and Vicki Reggie Kennedy will set sail off Nantucket, often by herself in a Herreshoff 12½ named La Bohème, after the Italian opera she and her late husband — Teddy, she called him — were attending when he proposed to her.

He gave her the boat years ago, and taught her to sail. He would follow her on the water in a rubber dinghy, calling out instructions, encouraging her, always patient.

Now, Vicki Kennedy's little boat has become both a place to think, she says, and a place to empty her mind. A place where the surviving half of Massachusetts' most recognizable political couple finds peace, alone on the sea.

Eight years after Senator Edward M. Kennedy's death, Vicki Kennedy remains the fiercest keeper of his legacy. His old friends are now her old friends.

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But on her own terms, and outside of the glare of public view, she has quietly rebuilt her professional life since her husband died, as a high-level corporate lawyer. She has done it while maintaining a presence in Boston, an adopted city to which she had no connection before Ted, whom she married in 1992.

In 2015, she returned to work at a law firm after a nearly 20-year hiatus, renewing a career she left to avoid the appearance of conflicts with her husband's Senate work. As a senior counsel in the corporate practice group at Greenberg Traurig, an international firm she had worked for in the 1990s, she advises business clients, while shuffling between the law firm's Boston and Washington, D.C., offices. It's the kind of legal work that generally stays out of public view, which seems to fit a lawyer comfortable advocating for a client or a cause, but who is reluctant to talk publicly about herself.

"I think she may be one of the better-kept secrets," said Jeri Asher, cofounder and executive vice president of Jibo Inc., a robotics company Kennedy represents. "In Boston it takes people a while when they know you in one role to recontextualize you in another. I can see there would be a little transition, and then people rediscovering Vicki completely on her own merits.

"When people ask who represents the firm and I tell them, they say, 'Oh, great.' And a light goes on."

Vicki Kennedy, 63, is not running for public office. This story was our idea, not hers. She was clear she'd prefer not to be profiled, though she ultimately participated in two interviews. She was polite and thoughtful, laughed easily, though she seemed to physically cringe at the idea of talking about herself. She joked at one point about having already read about her life "in National Enquirer."

Or as her friend, former vice president Joe Biden, said in a Globe telephone interview, "Being a Kennedy has gotta be pretty tough, man, you know?"



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

**Vicki Kennedy greeted President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden in 2015 at a formal ceremony to dedicate the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate.**

In Ted Kennedy's absence, Vicki Kennedy has remained active in civic life. She serves on boards for charities, such as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Most prominently, she is president of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate, a kind of classroom in governance and homage to American democracy next to the JFK Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.

Biden, who thinks of Vicki Kennedy "like a sister," said she has an abiding personal commitment to the institute, which Biden illustrated with a story:

Among the thousands of condolences Biden received after the death of his son, Beau, in 2015, one of his most treasured came from Vicki Kennedy, Biden said.

In her note, Vicki recalled that every time Ted Kennedy would feel down, he'd reread a letter his father, US Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., had written to a friend about losing his son Joe Jr. in World War II. Vicki sent Biden a copy of the elder Kennedy's letter.

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“He said, ‘I realize I could make no sense of why this happened,’ ” Biden recalled, paraphrasing Joe Sr.’s letter. “Then one day, because life has to continue to be lived, I thought to myself, what would Joe do if he were still alive? And decided to devote my life to doing what he would have done.’ ”

“I think that Vicki’s advice to me when she sent that letter is the explanation for why she’s doing what she’s doing,” Biden said. “There is solace and strength and a sense of peace that comes with continuing to do what Teddy would be doing today.”

“When you lose part of your soul or your heart, as she did,” said Biden, whose first wife and a daughter died in a car crash in 1972, “staying engaged, having purpose is the only real way to be able to deal with the loss.

“What would Teddy be doing? I think that gives her purpose.”

## His closest adviser and staunchest ally

The sharply abridged version of Vicki Kennedy’s life before Ted goes like this.

She was born Victoria Reggie and grew up in Crowley, La., in an influential Democratic political family. Her father, Edmund Reggie, was a city judge. In 1956, Edmund Reggie took a shine to 39-year-old Senator John F. Kennedy, who was seeking his party’s nomination for vice president. Reggie is credited with delivering the Louisiana delegation to Kennedy’s camp at the convention, and though JFK ultimately lost the nomination, the Kennedy and Reggie families developed an enduring bond.

Vicki Reggie went to Catholic schools, graduated as her high school’s valedictorian, and then studied English at Newcomb College. An adviser there refused to write her a recommendation for grad school. Instead, he encouraged her to go to law school. *Be a woman of achievement*, he told her, *don’t settle for basking in the reflected light of some man’s glory*.



“It was this aha moment for me,” Kennedy said. “We’re talking in the ’70s — there weren’t that many women in my sphere . . . who had done law. I don’t think I knew anybody.”

She graduated from Tulane Law School in 1979, and later worked at a Chicago law firm, where she was assigned to the banking law department, a technical, wonkish area of practice.

“I was,” Kennedy said, “a total law nerd.”

But beneath those byzantine banking regulations were people’s lives, she said.

“The survival of those local banks impacted the people in those communities. It was the livelihood of the local mom and pop store who needed the loan. Was that S&L going to be able to make the home loan for that person down the street? Did they understand — the regulators — how important this bank was to the community?”

She moved to Washington, D.C., in 1981, and had two children with her first husband, lawyer Grier C. Raclin. They divorced in 1990.

The following year, Vicki hosted a 40th anniversary party for her parents, who invited family friend Ted Kennedy. He came alone. Vicki teased him. What? Couldn’t find a date?

Soon they were the ones dating.

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Their romance began at a rough time for Ted Kennedy. He had gotten a reputation as a hard-living carouser, which had hurt his public standing. He gave a speech at Harvard that fall, acknowledging his personal shortcomings. Kennedy was called to testify that year in the rape trial of his nephew, William Kennedy Smith, who was ultimately acquitted.



“Vicki was there for turbulent times,” said Patrick Kennedy (second from right), Ted Kennedy’s son and a former Rhode Island congressman.

“Vicki was there for turbulent times,” said Patrick Kennedy, 50, Ted Kennedy’s son and a former Rhode Island congressman. “She had great impact in his turning it around personally and politically — and those two were connected.”

Ted Kennedy was 60 when they wed in 1992; Vicki was 38.

She was already an accomplished person, and then suddenly a famous one — something she still seems to have trouble accepting. “I never thought of myself as a famous person,” she said. “I didn’t think, ‘I’m marrying a famous person.’ I just thought ‘I’m marrying the man I love.’”

She had Ted Kennedy’s absolute trust, and became a close policy and political adviser.

“She was there on the field, on the sidelines and sometimes calling the plays,” Patrick Kennedy said. With Vicki in his life, Ted Kennedy bounced back to keep his seat in the 1994 election, defeating Mitt Romney, probably the most formidable challenger he had ever faced.

“She saved his life and [contributed] to the most productive part of his career,” said Chris Dodd, former senator from Connecticut, who was among Ted Kennedy’s best friends.

But to Patrick Kennedy, Vicki represented competition.

“A lot of people leave politics to be closer to their family,” Patrick said. “I got into politics to be closer to my family — to my dad. I always wanted more from him.” Before Vicki, “it had been easier to compete for his attention. Now I had to go through her. I found it disruptive to the relationship I had with my dad.

“So I resented her for it,” he said.

Patrick says now he was too focused on himself. “It wasn’t until I got married and had a family of my own could I understand the importance of that spousal relationship,” said Kennedy, a bachelor into his 40s who married in 2011. “I have a great relationship with Vicki today. We talk all the time, text each other all the time.

“It wasn’t that anything changed,” he said, before pausing to correct himself. “I changed.”

Looking to the future

It is very likely Vicki Kennedy would have been appointed senator after her husband’s death had she wanted the job. Instead, then-governor Deval Patrick appointed Paul Kirk, a longtime assistant and friend of Ted Kennedy’s, to serve out the balance of the term. It seems no matter how often Vicki Kennedy is asked about her interest in entering politics, she gives a similar answer.

“I never had a passion for running for office,” she said recently. “I always had a passion for civic engagement and for being involved. Always. I don’t really have an answer beyond that. I felt my contribution to giving back was the institute and I could do so much from that perch.”



GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2011

After Ted Kennedy's death, Vicki drove the effort to complete the institute. J. Keith Motley, former chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Boston, said he and others originally involved with the project had imagined a monument to the senator's legacy.

"We were there to try to make it a shrine," Motley said.

It was Vicki Kennedy who said no — that was not the vision. The institute was about the Senate itself, and American democracy, not any one person. "She was adamant," Motley recalled. "She had to remind us."

After Ted Kennedy's death, Vicki Kennedy drove the effort to complete the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate.

In 2012, Vicki Kennedy found herself in unwanted headlines after Anna Maria College, a Catholic school in Paxton, Mass., rescinded its invitation to have Kennedy speak at commencement. The school disinvited her under pressure from Worcester Bishop Robert J. McManus, who believed Vicki Kennedy's views on hot-button social issues went against Catholic teachings, the Globe reported at the time. Ted Kennedy had faced similar criticism throughout his political career.

"It hurt a lot," Kennedy said, reflecting on the controversy. "Because I didn't feel that the bishop knew me."

She got over it, she said, and insists the incident did not harm her personal relationship with the church. "My grandfather had a great expression. He said, 'Me against my brother but my brother and me against the world.' That's how I feel about the church. I can have a hurt feeling but I'll be darned if anybody is going to break up a relationship with my family."

Kennedy ran her own consulting firm from 2013-15, and then at the opening of the EMK Institute in 2015, she got talking to Marvin S. Rosen, a shareholder at Greenberg Traurig, a firm with more than 2,000 lawyers. He told her: You kept your promise, you opened the institute, now come home. She started back at the firm on Sept. 1, 2015.

Kennedy provides strategic advice to companies on law and business matters, she said, afraid to get any more specific due to lawyer-client confidentiality. She said she does not do lobbying work.

Asher, of Jibo, the Boston robotics company, said Kennedy is skilled at mobilizing the right legal expertise at the large, international firm to address specific issues in general business law, financial agreements and contracts, and intellectual property.

"She acts as the hub and spoke within the law firm," Asher said. "I can go to Vicki and say 'I want your best person on international trade and international commerce.' She would look at the roster; she'd pick the person who she thought had the right expertise."

One of Kennedy's colleagues at Greenberg Traurig, Jean DeLuca, said Kennedy is skilled at overseeing teams of lawyers assembled from the firm's offices around the world. "The person running it has to be somebody every trusts," she said.

Clients recognize the Kennedy name, "and ultimately that's good for the firm," DeLuca acknowledged. "But you get past those questions in a hurry; at this level it's about whether you can deliver."

Kennedy shuffles between homes in Boston and Washington, D.C., depending on where she needs to be for clients. She jokes that she is known for spending more time wherever her dog happens to be. If her dog is in Massachusetts, her Boston colleagues presume she'll be around for a while. The dog is Captain Courageous, the last of the Portuguese water dogs she owned with her husband, who was known to bring dogs Sunny and Splash to his Capitol Hill office.

Her son is a business executive in New York, her daughter works abroad overseeing health programs that serve refugees. They are both in their early 30s. "That's amazing because, you know — I'm 40," Kennedy deadpanned.

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Vicki Kennedy does not have to work. She just likes it. She couldn't quite articulate what this stage of her career was building toward. "Definitely not retirement," she said, before launching into a long, enthusiastic riff on working in the law:

"I love the camaraderie. I love being on a journey with my clients. I love helping to solve a problem. I love being on a team with my colleagues. I love the fun of that; I love the camaraderie of that. I love that lots of heads are better than one in solving a problem. I love that dynamism of all being together and trying to figure out something that's really complicated. I love the part of having a young woman who's on the cusp of her career, that maybe you can help in some way — a young man, too.

"I'm always looking to the future," she said. "I try to be that person who is always looking to the future."

GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2000



**Ted Kennedy taught Vicki how to sail, patiently following her on the water in a rubber dinghy, calling out instructions.**

*Mark Arsenault can be reached at [mark.arsenault@globe.com](mailto:mark.arsenault@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@bostonglobemark](https://twitter.com/bostonglobemark).*