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The Philadelphia Inquirer / BONNIE WELLER

Roberts sharing a laugh with her mother, Lindy Boggs, last week at the home of Sheldon Hackney, president of the University of Pennsylvania.

By Katharine Scelye
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

It was just before Cokie Roberts' wedding day, in 1966, when she peeked into her mother's kitchen.

There was Lindy Boggs, wife of Hale Boggs, majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, balancing a granddaughter on one hip, clutching the phone with the other hand, dictating a speech and eyeing the oven, where she had posted a note that said, "Take me out at 3:00."

With a Southerner's gusto for cooking, Lindy Boggs, who later became a member of Congress herself, had insisted on preparing all the fixings for her daughter's 1,500 wedding guests. For the doyenne of Washington garden parties, once dubbed "mostess hostess" by Time magazine, it was just another colossal soiree.

For her daughter — the latest sensation at ABC News, where her intimate knowledge of Congress, her full-throated laugh and her champagne smile enliven the gray proceedings on *This Week With David Brinkley* and where she, sometimes substitutes for Ted Koppel on *Nightline* — it was just another glimpse of a capable woman doing it all.

And now that kitchen scene is the topic on the table at a luncheon at the University of Pennsylvania, where the mother-daughter duo has been invited to join an anthropological examination of a little-understood cultural phenomenon — the powerful woman in Washington.

A woman from Penn law school wonders why news stories about successful women always describe the hurdles they've overcome. Roberts says she's ambiva-

KEEPING UP WITH

Cokie Roberts

She's one busy journalist. "This Week With David Brinkley."

National Public Radio. Filling in for Ted Koppel.

Not to mention the 32 quarts of tomato sauce.

lent about this journalistic convention.

She is relieved that the papers no longer describe someone such as her mother as a "pert grandmother," she says. Yet to ignore the domestic side of life doesn't give the full picture. "The fact that we've raised families is a huge and important part of our lives," she says, "and to leave it out is to highly inaccurately describe us."

Moreover, she adds, it's "empowering" for readers to

know that a woman has done it all. "To not include it is to denigrate us."

So let the record show: Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs Roberts, wife of Steven Roberts, once of the New York Times and now a senior writer at U.S. News & World Report, is the mother of two children: Their daughter, Rebecca, graduated recently from

Princeton and works for a women's job-training program in Chicago; their son, Lee, a graduate of Duke, goes to law school at Georgetown.

Like her mother, Roberts is a maniac in the kitchen. When she returned home (she lives in the house in Bethesda, Md., where she grew up) from two exhausting weeks covering the Republican National Convention in Houston in the summer, she took a quick nap, then headed for the garden, where the tomatoes had grown out of control. She whipped up 32 quarts of tomato sauce and made soup with the rest. Last week, after getting up at 6 a.m. for her gig on National Public Radio (in her nightgown), she prepared a Passover seder for 30.

Her first national exposure came from covering Congress for NPR in 1978. She remains loyal to the radio network and considers its audience important: "When you want to reach the academy, the business community, the political community, that's the place to reach them. ... [On radio] you can get across ideas more easily than you can on television, though not as easily as you can in print," and so she pens occasional op-ed pieces in her spare time.

In January, Roberts was named a full-time panelist on the Brinkley show, the top-rated of the three Sunday-morning network talkers. That three-month period since January ranks as the most-watched quarter in the show's history (except for during the Persian Gulf war).

"It may be coincidence," says David Glodt, the show's producer, "but there's no reason she shouldn't take credit." (Of course, Bill Clinton might take credit, too.) What she brings to the show, he says, apart from her vast experience, is her laughter, which lights up the set but irks about half of the viewers who write in (the other half love it). She also brings Tabasco sauce for eggs in the green room.

She belongs to what Sheldon Hackney, the president of Penn and a longtime family friend, calls the first family of American politics: Both parents were members of Congress, from a district in New Orleans. Her sister, Barbara Boggs Sigmund, was mayor of Princeton Borough until her death from cancer in October 1990. Her brother, Thomas Hale Boggs Jr., is one of the most powerful lawyer-lobbyists in Washington. (It was he who, at age 3, coined the name Cokie because he couldn't pronounce Corinne.)

At 49, Roberts is on the verge of becoming a celebrity. Moreover, she's helping to test whether the public will accept women who actually age on the air. TV newswomen tend to be perpetually 25; while their male colleagues stay and gray.

"No one knows how long they'll let us stay," Roberts says. The pioneers, such as Barbara Walters, worked around the hurdles, she says, but the hurdles remained. "We came along a few years later as an entire generation demanding that the hurdles be

Roberts' position as a high-profile female force in Washington always prompts questions about another such force. When Roberts is on the lecture circuit, she says, the first question she is asked is always about Hillary Rodham Clinton. (Both attended Wellesley College in the 1960s, but their stays didn't overlap.) In three public forums here last week — at the luncheon, at a lecture at Penn and on Channel 6's *AM/Philadelphia* — that held true to form. "The argument in our living rooms and our kitchens is the role of women," she says by way of explaining the intense curiosity about Hillary Clinton. "It is the revolution of our time."

But each time the Hillary question was posed, Roberts deflected it. She is, after all, a journalist. While she freely speculates about public issues — she predicts that Congress won't overturn the Hyde amendment, which bars federal funding of abortions; she thinks the first female president will probably be a vice president who assumes the office when the chief dies — she keeps her personal feelings close to the vest, even though inquiring minds want to know.

Listen to the overly enthusiastic Wally Kennedy on *AM/Philadelphia*: "Can you be pro-woman, can you be pro-women-in-politics, can you be pro-change and not be wild about Hillary Rodham Clinton? In 1993? Can you love women but not like her?" His eyes bulge as if Cokie is the Hope Diamond herself.

Roberts lets her mother, a Democratic partisan who campaigned for

could not like Hillary Clinton," she responds, demonstrating why Lindy Boggs, now 77 and writing her memoirs while remaining active in community, artistic and historical affairs, is known as the nicest, most gracious person in Washington.

"It's a contradiction in terms!" gushes Kennedy.

By the time he gets to Roberts, the question is defused. Roberts notes noncommittally that Clinton "does her homework, and members of Congress are very grateful for people who do their homework."

But Roberts has no qualms about sharing the latest irreverencies from the political front. If Dan Quayle was known for looking like a deer caught in the headlights, she tells her standing-room-only audience in a Penn lecture hall, Al Gore is the deer mounted on the wall. He's so stiff and robotic, she adds, that people wonder if the key in his back rips the upholstery.

If anyone knows her way around the Capitol, it's Roberts, who as a child used to hop into House Speaker Sam Rayburn's lap and whose father probably would have become speaker if he hadn't disappeared in 1972 in a small plane in Alaska. Her mother still receives reports of sightings of the wreckage.

In an interview, Roberts is asked about the lack of finality that stems from a disappearance, as opposed to a death. "There's a reason we have been doing burial customs from time out of mind," she says. "These are end statements." Then she begins to smile: "You always sort of half expect him to come crawling out with a long white beard."

"Looking gorgeous," her mother interjects, and both dissolve in laughter.

Lindy Boggs won election to her husband's seat in 1973 and served until she retired in 1990, then the only white in Congress representing what had become a majority black district. Off Statuary Hall in the Capitol is a suite of offices named in her honor.

Roberts recently was in the Capitol, showing Glodt, the Brinkley show producer, secret rooms and back stairways, places she has known since childhood. He says he was amazed to hear the guards say, "Oh, hi, Cokie. Here, take the keys."

It must have helped her as a reporter, this intimate knowledge of Congress and having a mother as a member. But when asked if her

mother ever tipped her off to stories, both mother and daughter erupt with a firm "No!" — at once but for different reasons.

Cokie jokes that she could have used the information. Her mother — or "Mama," the one Southernism that crops up in Roberts' otherwise upper-crust, East Coast TV-speak — wouldn't give it.

"I could have," Boggs says. But she adds that her daughter and her son respected her position and would never have compromised her. Nor would they have compromised them-

selves by relying on her, say mother and daughter.

In fact, says Roberts, her brother "is a much better source than my mother." A partner in the high-powered firm of Patton, Boggs & Blow, he is in a line of work that is much-maligned these days. He was pictured last fall on the cover of the *National Journal* under the headline: "Ready to Cash In on Clinton." Roberts leaps to his defense.

"I have respect for the institution of lobbying," she says. "I know that's an odd thing to say in modern America, when Ross Perot would lock them all up. But lobbying is protected in the First Amendment ... the right to petition the Congress. And everybody and every possible interest has a lobbyist, whether it's the Children's Defense Fund or the United Church Women of America or Exxon. And Tommy's represented all of them. He's someone I respect and admire greatly. He's known as someone who does his homework religiously, knows the institution extremely well and gives very good advice and information."

It is this posture that sparks some criticism. Jeff Cohen, executive director of FAIR, a New York-based, left-leaning, media-watchdog group, calls Roberts part of the "pundit elite."

"She speaks for the establishment, she's from the establishment, and she's the epitome of a Washington insider," he says. "She ignores the real special interests who we believe have major power over Washington — the corporate lawyers and lobbyists — and her brother is the archetype of those interests."

This didn't seem to bother Perot, who actually put Cokie Roberts on his short list of vice presidential

prospects. She says she would have liked at least to participate in the vice presidential debate so that when Gore and Quayle started sniping at each other, she could have said: "Boys, go to your rooms. This is unacceptable behavior."

A woman at the Penn lecture is moved to tell her that when she watches the Brinkley show, she cries out "Cokie for president!" She asks if Roberts would consider a career change.

"The minute I declared [for office], you'd hate me," Roberts answers.

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for politicians," she says at another point, "so much so that I won't do it. I work very hard, but

it's a different kind of work. When my day is done, it is done. People do not call me at 3 o'clock in the morning and ask me to get their kid out of jail.

"It's just a much more public life of service than I am comfortable with," she adds. "I am essentially a more private person."

But with her career in mid-trajectory, it may be increasingly difficult to maintain that privacy. She's done Leno and Letterman and even *Entertainment Tonight*. A celebrity profile appeared in the February *Lear's* magazine. She seems to be interviewed as much as she interviews.

"I'm doing what I want to do when I grow up," she laughs.

But it looks like a warm-up act for something bigger. Anchoring? Her own show? Replacing Brinkley?

Like a true politician, she doesn't shut any doors.

"I don't want to sound like I'm closing myself off to options," she quickly adds. "If things come along that people are interested in talking to me about, God knows, I'm interested in talking."

Roberts even made Ross Perot's short list of vice presidential prospects.