

UTAH ATTORNEY GENERAL IS EVIDENCE NEW MOTHERS CAN ALSO BE LEADERS

Patty Henetz

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It was during a debate in southern Utah with her opponent, Iron County Attorney Scott Burns, that Jan Graham hit a rough spot in her 1992 campaign for attorney general.

A woman stood and asked Graham, pregnant for the first time at age 42, whether she thought holding office would be fair to her new baby.

Graham -- who suggested that Burns also respond, since he, too, had a small child at home -- recalls her answer: Mothers and new mothers can be a lot of things. Most important, they can be leaders.

But the question had struck the nerve that drove her campaign.

"I wanted to say, `What are you really asking? Are you worried about this kid? Or are you angry because I'm not like you?' " Graham said. "See, I was trying to do something important, AND have a baby."

If a June survey conducted for The Salt Lake Tribune is any indication, most of the 300 Salt Lake City women interviewed are pleased with the example Graham has set during her first year in office.

Sixty-seven percent found Graham a good role model, and more than 70 percent thought her job performance will ease the way for future female officeholders.

In winning the election and bearing her son, Graham beat the odds on both counts. Conception had been difficult for her. And as a pregnant female Democrat, she appeared to face insurmountable odds in a Republican, patriarchal culture.

But her biggest challenge may be to weather a term in an office that has chewed up and spit out many of her predecessors, including Paul Van Dam, under whom Graham served as the state's solicitor general.

Near the end of his single term, a weary Van Dam held a closed-door meeting with his entire staff to announce he wouldn't run again. Chief among the reasons he gave was the beating he'd taken from the news media during his administration, particularly over his decisions to hire outside counsel to defend the state's abortion law and to pursue antitrust action against the University of Utah.

But he wasn't the only attorney general whose legacy is less than stellar.

Republican David Wilkinson focused on polarizing issues, especially on Utah's cable-television legislation, pouring state funds into a doomed effort to defend legislation that would have censored cable content.

Other former attorneys general have also fared badly -- Republican Robert Hansen was censured by the Utah State Bar, and Democrat Phil Hansen was disbarred.

Utah's governor and attorney general often have been from opposing political parties, and their professional relationships have reflected the division. Gov. Mike Leavitt and Graham, according to Robin Riggs, general counsel to the Republican, are cordial.

Graham's dedication to cooperation and her personal style, "a nice mix of being tough and kind of gentle," may make a difference in an office that at times has seemed cursed, says Jill Remington, vice-chairwoman of the Utah Democratic Party.

And she relishes the politics.

"I love coming to work," she said. "The balance in my life is perfect. To say that I'm lucky would be an understatement."

Gone forever are the days when she worked 80 hours a week in solo practice. "My family is where I get my strength," she said. Graham acknowledges that her ability to have in-home child care for her son makes her unusually fortunate, and says that being a new parent has personalized her already fervent commitment to child protection.

The fact that Graham is Utah's first female statewide office holder and the nation's only female attorney general with an infant will always set her apart. "She's an example to us," Remington said. "And it's the right time for that example."