



Gingrich-Jones, Candace (b. 1966)

by Linda Rapp

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The half-sister of former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, whose record on glbtq rights is abysmal, Candace Gingrich-Jones is an out and proud lesbian activist who serves as a spokesperson and Senior Youth Outreach Manager for the Human Rights Campaign.

Candace Gingrich-Jones is separated from her brother by twenty-three years in age and most of the breadth of the American political spectrum in philosophy. By the time of her birth, her brother was already gone from the parental home--married (to his former high school geometry teacher), a father, and living in Georgia.

In 1942 Kathleen Daugherty and Newton C. McPherson, Jr.--both in their teens--were wed. The unhappy union lasted only a few months but produced a child, Newton Leroy. Two years after the divorce, Daugherty married Robert Gingrich, who adopted her son and gave him his family name. Newt Gingrich has chosen to pronounce it with a final "ch" sound (to avoid having to correct constituents), whereas the rest of the family uses a "k" sound that is closer to the authentic pronunciation of the German name.

A career Army officer, Robert Gingrich took his growing family with him to postings in the United States and Europe. Daughters Susan and Roberta were born in 1948 and 1950, respectively. The baby of the family, Candace, came along much later, on June 2, 1966.

Shortly after Candace's birth, her father was deployed to Vietnam. On his return, the Gingrichs continued the typically peripatetic life of a military family, including a stint in Panama from 1972 to 1974, after which Robert Gingrich retired from the army. The Gingrichs settled in Dauphin, Pennsylvania, just outside of Harrisburg, where their two older daughters were already living.

Young Candace Gingrich was a tomboy, disdaining dolls in favor of sports. She played softball and golf and "dreamed of playing middle linebacker in Pop Warner football, knocking running backs to the ground with well-timed hits," an aspiration that was, of course, not realized.

Although Gingrich was a bright child, she was, by her own admission, "a disaffected student" who "failed to make the most of [her] ability in the classroom." Nevertheless, she did well enough in high school to earn admission to Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where she majored in sociology.

Gingrich "had been inching out of the closet since Girl Scout camp a decade earlier," when she, at the age of ten, was attracted to a tent-mate but "lacked the information to understand what [she] had felt for another girl."

A few years later, at a field hockey camp, she again felt attraction to a teammate, but by then she "was painfully aware that to let on about [her] secret crush would be a kind of athletic suicide."

Gingrich continued playing sports and discovered her athletic passion when she went out for the IUP

women's rugby team. By the end of her collegiate playing days, she no longer feared coming out to friends and teammates. In her sociology classes she not only met out and confident lesbians and "reveled in the nonjudgmental manner with which the rest of the class handled the women's disclosures," but also grew increasingly secure in her own identity.

She had already spoken the word, but in a paper in her last semester at IUP in 1989, she wrote it, identifying herself as a lesbian and saying, "It has been one of the best feelings in the world knowing that I'm comfortable with myself."

Gingrich's coming out to her family was somewhat awkward, as it was occasioned by her mother's discovery of a lesbian publication to which she had subscribed. Kathleen Gingrich was initially distressed and thought that her daughter's sexual orientation was somehow her "fault," but her love for her child and her wish to see her happy won the day: "Though I'm still not sure she understands exactly what it means to be a lesbian, she has been very supportive," wrote Gingrich in 1996.

Her father and sisters were also accepting, and so, at least nominally, was her brother, a U. S. Congressman from Georgia since 1978. At the same time, however, Newt Gingrich was also courting homophobic Christian conservatives for political support.

After her graduation in 1989, Gingrich returned to her parents' home in Dauphin, and held down two jobs, one as a computer consultant for the Pennsylvania Department of Education and another loading trucks for United Parcel Service.

Although Gingrich had become aware of glbtq rights issues through her college courses and her own coming-out process, she had not been particularly political until late 1994, soon after her brother had been elected Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives. (He assumed the office on January 4, 1995 and served until January 3, 1999.) At the family's Thanksgiving dinner--not attended by Newt Gingrich--one of her sisters called her attention to published comments by their brother about homosexuality. She was incensed by what he had said.

The Speaker-elect declared that there was room in the Republican party for gay men and lesbians as long as they were "in broad agreement with our effort to renew American civilization."

"I think on most things most days, the vast majority of practicing homosexuals are good citizens," he added lamely.

Although he spoke against excluding gay men and lesbians from the Republican party completely, he did not offer an especially warm welcome, saying that the party's stance "should be toleration It should not be promotion, and it should not be condemnation."

Expounding on his views, he called homosexuality an "orientation in the way alcoholism is an orientation" and said that, for people with "a propensity" to be homosexual, "I . . . believe that becoming celibate is an option." He also denied the right of same-sex couples to consider themselves a family: "It is madness to pretend that families are anything other than heterosexual couples. I think it goes to the core of how civilization functions."

The article also mentioned that Newt Gingrich had a lesbian sister, and once that piece of information appeared in the *New York Times*, Candace Gingrich was in the spotlight, interviewed by both print and broadcast media.

Instead of having the proverbial fifteen minutes of fame as the subject of a diverting feature story, Gingrich

found herself on the road to becoming a public figure in her own right as an advocate for equality for glbtq people. In January 1995 Elizabeth Birch and David M. Smith, the executive director and communications director, respectively, of the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF)--now called the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)--extended her an invitation to become their spokesperson for that year's National Coming Out Day and also to participate in their leadership conference and lobbying day in March, with a view to the possibility of her taking a permanent job with the organization.

Gingrich called the lobbying meetings "eye-openers." The day-long events culminated with an invitation from her brother to an impromptu press conference at which he stated, "I love my sister, period," but went on to say, "I consider Candace a sinner," an opinion undoubtedly endorsed by his supporters on the religious right.

Unaccustomed to life in the public eye, Candace Gingrich wrestled with the decision about entering "the high-pressure world of the cultural wars," but the opportunity to work for equality for glbtq people overcame any qualms. The accidental and somewhat reluctant activist signed on with HRCF as a spokesperson for National Coming Out Day.

For the next six months she traversed the country on a speaking tour that took her to more than fifty cities. The activities came to a celebratory conclusion on October 11. Gingrich began National Coming Out Day by participating in a press conference on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., then flew to Los Angeles, where she joined actor Dan Butler, legislator Sheila J. Kuehl, and others in a second event.

Gingrich was subsequently appointed Senior Youth Outreach Manager for the HRC. She has been a frequent speaker on college campuses, urging glbtq students and their allies to work for equality. She also writes the "Ask Candace" feature on the HRC web site, in which she provides advice--often related to coming out--to glbtq young people and their families.

Gingrich has undertaken other projects as well, including voter-registration drives and speaking tours to educate the public about anti-glbtq ballot measures.

Gingrich has made guest appearances on the situation comedies *Ellen* and *Friends*. On the latter, she played a minister marrying a lesbian couple. She was pleased to take part in the show--top-rated the week it aired in January 1996--since it depicted a same-sex relationship in a positive way.

In May 1996, with specific regard to his sister, Newt Gingrich said on *Meet the Press* that he would not attend a same-sex wedding if she ever had one because he would not consider the union a marriage. She responded by stating that she had been present at his second wedding--as she would later be at his third--not as a show of support for heterosexual marriage but rather in support of a member of her family.

Despite her busy schedule, Gingrich remains active in rugby, playing for a Washington, D.C. club, the Furies.

In 2006 the team took part in the Bingham Cup of the International Gay Rugby Association and Board. The award is named for Mark Bingham, who perished on United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. Gingrich was proud that the Furies were "part of something honoring Bingham's memory and his selfless act of courage. It is significant because Mark Bingham was and is inspirational to millions of Americans. But he is also an inspiration to gay athletes everywhere."

On September 5, 2009, Gingrich married her partner Rebecca Jones in Boston. The couple changed their last names to Gingrich-Jones.

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