

NBC'S First Read

Gingrich's daughter defends father on campaign trail

By NBC's Ali Weinberg

COLUMBIA, S.C. – Not fifteen minutes into her second campaign event of the day, Newt Gingrich's daughter Jackie Gingrich Cushman got the question she seems to have come to expect.

“There's been such a big fuss on the three marriages,” a supporter, who had come to meet Cushman at the Scarlet Chord coffee shop in Laurens, said. “How does he deal with the innuendo in that?”

Cushman, the daughter of Gingrich and his first wife, Jackie Battley, didn't miss a beat.

“Most families have gone through terrible things, whether it's divorce or tragedy. That's life,” she said. “We've healed, we've reconciled.”

While Cushman may have healed from her parents' divorce (she was thirteen at the time), many Republican voters still balk at her father's infidelity and three marriages.

So Cushman seems to have taken it upon herself to tell the story of her family, and specifically her father, from her perspective – leaving no topic off-limits.

“I try to frame it in a way that makes sense and resonates with people,” Cushman told NBC News. “Like many families, we had a hard time and we've all moved on. And we're all focused on helping each other.”

In fact, several times during her five-stop jaunt through South Carolina's Upstate, Cushman chose to address the divorce issue head on, using a half/serious, half/humorous anecdote about when her father and then-boyfriend Jimmy Cushman met for the first time, at a bar.

Standing next to two other men at the bar, Cushman said she heard one say, “There's Newt Gingrich. I heard he abandoned his wife and children.”

“I felt compelled to turn around and explain to this guy that that was not true,” Cushman told a group of supporters at a cocktail party in Greenville. “And I almost felt bad for him because obviously he was shocked and terribly embarrassed.”

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He was, Cushman suggested, a consumer of misinformation, which Gingrich has been combating since his days on Capitol Hill.

“I let you know that story -- it is kind of funny -- to let you know that there are a lot of things out there that aren't true,” Cushman said, imploring the 20 supporters gathered to visit the “answers page” at Newt.org for more information about the divorce issue.

Cushman also mentioned several times a different story dealing with a much-publicized scenario in which Gingrich visited his soon-to-be-ex wife Battley in the hospital.

Reports at the time said Gingrich demanded a divorce while Battley was on her deathbed; Cushman recently wrote an op-ed saying the divorce was already in progress and her mother was getting a tumor, which was benign, removed.

In Cushman's anecdote, a woman who heard the hospital story said she thought Cushman's mother was dead. “Because she had heard these terrible rumors on the Internet which are not true, she assumed that my mother must be dead,” Cushman said.

In addition to, as she puts it, “setting the record straight” about her father, Cushman also intends to show voters how Gingrich has changed since leaving the public eye. For one, his faith is deeper, she said, as a result of trying to move beyond his infidelity.

“He's talked about how he's made mistakes in his past. He's talked about how he's had to ask for God's forgiveness. He' stalked about reconciling with God and with others,” she said.

His professional demeanor has also changed, she said.

“Because he hasn't been in the public eye for over a decade, when you first mention his name, many people think about the news reports that were reported when he was speaker. And he had thousands and thousands of negative articles at that time,” Cushman said.

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“But in addition to being disciplined, he's now very cheerful and very optimistic and I think it's a very good example of a happy warrior out on the campaign trail,” she added.

She also dismissed as sour grapes complaints from his former Congressional colleagues, like Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) who called Gingrich too erratic and self-centered to be president.

“He balanced the budget with President Clinton. He reformed welfare, cut spending and cut taxes. That is a level of real change in Washington and to go through that type of change, not everyone is going to feel comfortable,” she said.

Gingrich also occasionally defend her father's recent proclamations on the campaign trail. One voter at the Spartanburg Republican Party's Christmas party, the last event of the day, brought up Gingrich's assertion that he would potentially subpoena "activist judges" to justify any controversial rulings.

"It's fairly steeped in controversy right now," said Hugh McMillan, 63, of Spartanburg.

Just as she had with the more personal issues of the day, Cushman explained her dad's side of the story, saying that he supported abolishing entire courts, like the Ninth Circuit of Appeals, if they were found to have gone "beyond how originally they were set up in terms of our Founding Fathers."

She then, as she had for questions over the divorces, referred McMillan to Newt.org, which addresses both the personal and the political, and those instances in which the two are hard to distinguish.

But Cushman did most of the defending of her father face-to-face with voters.

This close to the holidays, Cushman said that Gingrich was nothing like the grouchy Christmas antagonist with a similar name as his: the Grinch.

"He's my dad and he's never stolen my Christmas," Cushman said. "He wasn't that person then and he's not that person now."