

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

December 13, 2011 12:00 P.M.

[My Father, Newt Gingrich](#)

Jackie Cushman discusses her mother, the divorce, and her father's evolution.

[By Robert Costa](#)



“That one brief moment doesn’t define our lives.”

Jackie Cushman, Newt Gingrich’s second daughter, tells National Review Online that her parents’ divorce, though painful, should not loom over her father as he pursues the presidency.

But Cushman acknowledges that the story of the divorce, and her father’s 1980 visit to Emory University Hospital to see her mother, Jackie Battley, has become political lore.

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Cushman sighs when I mention the November 1984 issue of *Mother Jones*.

For more than a quarter century, the magazine’s profile of her father has haunted Gingrich’s reputation. In the piece, her father’s associates claim that he approached his first wife, then battling cancer, with a “yellow legal pad” scribbled with a “list of things on how the divorce was going to be handled.”

Ever since the article was published, Gingrich has been accused, to various extents, of coolly and abruptly leaving his cancer-stricken wife for a much younger woman.

Cushman, who was 13 when her parents split, says she and her older sister, Kathy Lubbers, have for the most part moved on from their initial frustration with the *Mother Jones* story.

But as Gingrich continues to rise, Cushman hopes that “inaccurate” retelling — which she says skews and politicizes her parents’ conversations — will not define her father’s character.

“A lot of times, people have the wrong impression, repeating what they have heard,” Cushman says. “It’s very important that people understand what the truth is, and then they can decide.”

“This is a very private matter,” Cushman says. “Divorce is always painful; it’s never an easy thing. And that was a hard time for my family.” Yes, her parents argued, but to call her father a monster, she says, is a disservice to the “four people actually involved.”

Rather than walking out of his family’s life, Cushman says, Gingrich worked diligently to keep his daughters close after his marriage’s collapse. Three decades later, the episode has become a healed wound, she tells me, remembered but rarely discussed.

Gingrich, for his part, is a loving father and doting grandfather, Cushman says, inviting her two children, Maggie and Robert, to debates and playfully winking at them on live television.

Gingrich and his third wife, Callista, she adds, always send flowers to Maggie before recitals, a tradition Gingrich started with his own daughters. And though he is busy on the campaign trail, Gingrich, she says, takes care to visit the Cushman home near Atlanta “as often as he can.”

Cushman notes that her family, like most families, is imperfect. But her father, she says, has never wavered from his commitment to his children and grandchildren. And that dedication, she says, is recognized by all within the Gingrich circle, including her mother, Jackie.

“I hear some stories about children who won’t talk to their parents after the divorce, or about siblings who don’t talk to each other. I know many families deal with situations like that,” Cushman says. “We’re very close. I talk to my dad every day and talk to my sister . . . well, I don’t know how many times a day, calling and texting. Same with my mom.”

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And years after the divorce, the relationship between Gingrich and his first wife, Cushman says, is not contentious but bound by a shared sense of duty and love for their daughters.

Jackie Battley, as most reporters know, is not interested in the spotlight or publicly discussing the past, and declines interview requests. But behind the scenes Battley has

approved of Cushman and Lubbers stumping for their father as he seeks the GOP presidential nomination.

“She’s been very supportive,” Cushman says. “The other day she told me, ‘Look, if you need to go anywhere, for the campaign or anything, let me know and I’ll come and watch the children.’”

But don’t expect Battley to join them. “My mother is very private,” Cushman explains, and she does not expect that to change, even if Gingrich wins the White House.

During the mid-1980s, Battley felt like she “mishandled” her response to Gingrich’s rapid congressional rise, Cushman says, especially when she spoke publicly about the divorce with the *Washington Post*, among others. Battley told her daughters that she was frequently misquoted and “decided it was better to go and live [outside the media glare].”

These days, “when it comes to her children and grandchildren, she’s like my father and wants to do what she can to help, in her own way.”

As Iowans head to the polls, Cushman does not expect voters to care about the private life of the Gingrich family, and bets that policy questions, not personal matters, will shape the debate. “We’ve been through this before,” she says, especially during the height of his speakership. “But he has learned a lot since then, and he’s grown in his faith,” converting to Roman Catholicism.

“He’s wiser and more patient,” Cushman says, and that has been a welcome change from the chaotic 1990s and the hurt of 1980. “What has remained through all of it is his love for us, how we’ve been able to stay close. That is more than most families can say.”

— *Robert Costa is a political reporter for National Review.*