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Jackie Gingrich Cushman, child janitor: 'I had so much satisfaction'

By [Melinda Henneberger](#)



Jackie Gingrich Cushman, daughter of Newt Gingrich, speaks at a news conference at the Georgia Capitol on Dec. 13, 2011, in Atlanta. (Phil Skinner - AP)

The hottest moment of [Monday night's debate](#) came when Newt Gingrich was asked by Fox News commentator and debate moderator Juan Williams whether he understood why his statements that poor kids should grab a mop and do some janitorial work in their schools had been seen as insulting:

“Speaker Gingrich, you recently said black Americans should demand jobs, not food stamps. You also said poor kids lack a strong work ethic and proposed having them work as janitors in their schools. Can’t you see that this is viewed at a minimum as insulting to all Americans, but particularly to black Americans? ... I got to tell you, my e-mail account and my Twitter account has been inundated with people of all races who are asking if your comments are not intended to belittle the poor and racial minorities.”

Williams was booed by the audience, and Gingrich applauded madly for his retort : “First of all, Juan, the fact is that more people have been put on food stamps by Barack Obama than any president in American history. Now, I know among the politically correct you’re not supposed to use facts that are uncomfortable.”

(The Washington Post Fact Checker [reports](#) that this is actually an uncomfortable stretch of the truth: “We have examined this issue before, giving Gingrich a Pinocchio for this statement. This is an example of taking a fact — an all-time high for food stamp recipients — and taking it out of context. The president is struggling with the aftermath of an economic situation he inherited, while building on food stamp changes that preceded his tenure.”)

But in answering Williams, Gingrich also mentioned that one of his grown daughters, Jackie Gingrich Cushman, herself had held a part-time janitorial job when she was 13.

In an interview this morning, Cushman spoke glowingly of the experience, cleaning bathrooms at the [First Baptist Church](#) in Carrollton, Ga.:

“I had so much satisfaction when I went in on Sunday mornings and the bathrooms were clean,” she said. “There was a lot of satisfaction in seeing a bathroom I’d cleaned with by own hands; who wants to walk into a dirty bathroom?” Cushman, who was paid by the hour, said she also enjoyed using the money “for clothes and eight-track tapes.”

(Disclosure: I was also a teen janitor, the summer I was 19, and had no complaints, either, about listening to [Todd Rundgren](#) while mowing, painting, and yes, scrubbing bathrooms, in an elementary school. Lots and lots of Todd Rundgren that summer; I think it was the only tape we had.)

Also in response to that question from Williams, Gingrich said that “only elites despise earning money.” What did he mean by that? They must have liked making it at some point.

“He gets attacked,” his daughter answered, “but his point is, what’s wrong with having people earn money?”

What he’s been attacked for is not the idea of instilling a work ethic but his belief that so many poor kids come from homes where that’s a foreign concept.

“Really poor children in really poor neighborhoods have no habits of working and have nobody around them who works,” he’s said, “so they have no habit of showing up on Monday. They have no habit of staying all day, they have no habit of, ‘I do this and you give me cash,’ unless it is illegal.”

Asked about the issues of temperament that her father’s rivals and former congressional colleagues have raised about him, Cushman said what voters need to know is that “he’s a much different person today than when he was speaker. He’s had the experience of hiring

people for a business. He has two grandchildren” — her children — “and he loves those two kids, and that’s deepened him. He wasn’t very patient as speaker, and he’s much more patient now. I’m very proud of him.”

Melinda Henneberger is a Post political writer and anchor of She the People, a forum for women writing on politics and culture. Follow her on Twitter at @MelindaDC.