



Strange BEDFELLOWS

These four New Jersey couples come from opposite sides of the political aisle. Their differences help keep them together.

By Sharon Waters Photographs by Peter Murphy

Republican Jon Bramnick, who recently won a tight race to retain his seat in the state Assembly, doesn't always see eye to eye with his more left-leaning wife, Pat. They agree to disagree and strive to respect each other's opinions.



When political

couple Gail and Bob Gordon watch a presidential debate, they retreat to opposite ends of their house: he, a Democrat, to the basement; she, a Republican, to her office on the top floor. It is one of the few times they watch news on TV, but it doesn't mean their Fair Lawn home is free of drama.

"Our drama is basically when we disagree on politics, which is all the time," says Gail, a Republican public affairs consultant married to a longtime Democrat legislator.

In today's divisive political climate, there are Garden State couples where a Democrat and Republican bridge the chasm every day at the dinner table, in the family room, and in the bedroom where it could be said they are sleeping with the enemy. For some well-known political couples in New Jersey, these purple marriages are not only surviving, but thriving.

Some of these mixed couple are downright famous for their differences. On a national scale there's the Democrat James Carville and his GOP spouse Mary Matalin, who have been known to hang out their political laundry on national televi-

sion. From New Jersey comes Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Trump, who must endure the anti-Trump pronouncements of her opinionated husband, attorney George Conway.

Still it's not surprising that such marriages endure, especially when both partners work in politics, says Karen Riggs Skean, co-director of the New Jersey Couples Clinic at Rutgers University.

"Each partner 'gets' something about his or her partner that others would not: what it is like to work in this particular context, its joys and sorrows, its particular stressors," says Skean, clinical associate professor at Rutgers's Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology. "Feeling known by our partner, that they truly understand what our days are like, what pressures and concerns we face, is a key part of the bond."

These politicians are not repelled by their differing opinions. "They are attracted to someone who has similar passions," says Skean. "Each finds the political world inherently compelling, worthy of time, thought, effort and attention. To that degree they would respect someone else with similar dedication."

JON BRAMNICK + PAT BRAMNICK

★★★ In nearly four decades of marriage, Pat Bramnick has avoided politics as much as possible, preferring to paint in her studio while Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick attends GOP events with state and national politicians. "That just wasn't my thing," says Pat. "They are not gods or kings. They are elected officials."

Pat is a registered Republican so she can vote for Jon in primaries, but her views hew left and "she hates Donald Trump," says her husband. On election night 2016, Pat was crying at 2 a.m. in their Westfield home. "I got walking pneumonia, and I swear my immune system dropped because [Trump] won," she says. "He's so vile. I was horrified that we would elect someone with no integrity."

Jon wasn't in politics yet when he met Pat Brentano in 1979 at the apartment building they shared on 58th Street

in Manhattan. Jon handed the doorman \$25—a nice sum at the time—to get info on Pat and then arranged to bump into her. On their first date, Jon told her he wanted to move to his hometown of Plainfield, open a law office and get involved in politics. Pat had moved to Manhattan from Evansville, Indiana, to be an artist but soon was relocating to Plainfield.

"We separated out, early on, the tasks involved in a marriage and it worked because I didn't interfere with him and he didn't interfere with me," says Pat, 70.

Jon, 66, says their relationship works because they respect each other, if not each other's candidates. "You can disagree on serious subjects, but if you don't have the basic respect for each other then I think there's a problem."

The Bramnick political divide continues in the next generation. Son Brent, 36, works at his father's law firm

and is active in Republican politics. Daughter Abby, 32, is an art therapist in the Bronx and very liberal. Abby registered as a Republican when she lived in Westfield so she could vote for her father, but Jon jokes he is unsure if Abby has ever pulled the lever for him.

The Bramnicks' worlds of politics and art have converged on occasion, including one evening in Mendham. Chris and Mary Pat Christie invited the Bramnicks to dinner, and the artist was surprised to find one of her paintings hanging in their home. The Christies bought the still-life at a charity auction in the 1980s, before they knew the Bramnicks.

"They carried it with them when they moved four times," says Jon. "It's their main piece of art, over their fireplace, just by accident." The Christies had no idea who the artist was, until she was standing in their living room. ■

GAIL GORDON + BOB GORDON

★★★ The mailbox can be a minefield in a mixed-politics marriage. Because Gail Gordon contributes to GOP candidates and causes, her Democrat husband Bob Gordon is often sorting through envelopes from the Federalist Society or invites to Mar-a-Lago.

“During campaigns, I get attack literature from Republicans,” says Bob, a state legislator from 2004-2018. “I’ve often been tempted to write, ‘Return to sender, you idiot,’ but I respect her mail.”

The Gordons disagree in other areas, such as fashion (don’t get Bob started on how many shoes Gail has) and decorating (she scoffs about the doilies that once adorned his house). They have different personalities too. Gail, 59, is candid, charismatic, spontaneous. Bob, 69, is fastidious and quieter — she calls him Eeyore, pointing to a stuffed version of the donkey on their couch.

They met at an early-80s party in Manhattan and hit it off, so much so that Bob invited Gail on a business trip to Vienna, Austria, a short time later — he says it was the last spontaneous thing he ever did. They agree it was a romantic success, but Bob neglected to call Gail fast enough. She moved on, dating Republicans, while Bob focused on work. Yet, Gail had made an impact. “As I dated, she was always the benchmark,” says Bob, now a commissioner of the state Board of Public Utilities.

Twenty years later, in his first statewide race in 2003, Bob solicited donations from everyone he knew and Gail sent a \$100 check, which led to a two-hour phone call and then Gail attending his swearing-in after he won. They married in 2006, with guests wearing “Bob & Gail ‘06” stickers that looked like campaign pins, and servers passing beverage napkins that said, “Republican, Democrat, which party? Cocktail.”

At their doily-free home in Fair Lawn, Gail can get ticked by a political comment from Bob, but Bob admits he is often oblivious. “It can be a little icy,” Gail says, “but never a shutdown because usually we can have a political discussion and then Bob will come down and go, ‘Is there lunch?’”

Their political differences have helped both careers. Bob says the exposure to so many Republicans through Gail made him more bipartisan as a legislator; he served in the Assembly and later the state Senate. “We could both use our network to help the other person,” he says. “Party labels become less important than personal relationships.” Gail, a public affairs consultant, says she gained a better appreciation of her political opponents’ viewpoints. “I am on my game because of the things Bob says to me.”

Common values keep them together, including ethics, friendships, charitable giving and the importance of serving the community. “I think it works because the foundation works,” says Gail. ■



Married in 2006, Gail and Bob Gordon say their shared values have made for a successful partnership, despite their political differences. But when it comes to political discussions, “It can be a little icy,” says Gail.

★★★



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IT'S OUR SHARED LOVE OF GOVERNMENT
THAT BROUGHT US TOGETHER."



Matt McDermott and Kay LiCausi's fourth date survived their first political discussion. "She didn't walk away or throw a drink in my face," recalls McDermott.



MATT McDERMOTT + KAY LiCAUSI

★★★ Meeting future in-laws can be nerve-racking in the best of situations but walking into a gathering of hard-core Democrats related to his then-girlfriend, Kay LiCausi, was especially tough for Republican Matt McDermott.

"You know you're on display. I didn't realize I was on display with a scarlet letter, which was in the shape of an R across my chest," says McDermott, the son of Frank X. McDermott, a longtime Republican leader who served in the state legislature in the 1960s and 1970s. McDermott, a jocular guy, is quick to add the LiCausi's family was very kind. "Turns out, there was no blood spilled."

The lobbyists had long known each other in Trenton. Before they dated, McDermott had sought help from LiCausi when she worked for then-Congressman Bob Menendez, and LiCausi later advocated her clients'

causes to McDermott when he was chief of staff to the lieutenant governor. McDermott was the "social butterfly of the Statehouse," according to LiCausi, so she kept running into him. McDermott's antenna on LiCausi sharpened after he saw a Christmas card with a photo of the single mother ("by choice," she notes) and her young daughter.

"I was impressed and intrigued by who she was," McDermott says. He asked if LiCausi would give him some career advice over a drink, and the outing became what they later realized was their first date. LiCausi, an admittedly cautious person, sought references on McDermott from political pals, and on the fourth date she grilled him on policy issues. "I could tell she was peppering me with questions, but she didn't get up and walk away or throw a drink in my face," McDermott recalls.

McDermott didn't get drenched because the Hoboken pair agrees on the importance of being bipartisan and keeping an open mind, whether as political practitioners or personal partners. "We agree on 95 percent of the issues. Our approach is just different," says LiCausi, 48, president of Hoboken Strategy Group Inc. "It's our shared love of government that brought us together." They also enjoy playfully poking fun of each other. "That banter goes a long way," says McDermott, 56, senior vice president at Kaufman Zita Group.

That they were dating stayed under the radar, until December 2017 when LiCausi was McDermott's guest at the Christie administration's last holiday party for staff at Drumthwacket. "What are you doing here?" a cabinet member and others asked LiCausi. Then the governor arrived. "He walked into the room and zeroed in on me," LiCausi recalls, "and maneuvered around 10 people to make sure he shook my hand and looked me in the eye and made me feel welcome."

The couple married in June 2019, at Battello in Jersey City, where they had their first date. They wrote their vows separately, and each needled the other about their political differences. And the in-laws beamed. ■

JOSHUA HENNE + JEANETTE HOFFMAN

★★★ During campaign season, the Henne-Hoffman home is not just a house divided but also a lawn split. Jeanette Hoffman, a Republican public affairs consultant, erects her candidates' signs on one side of the yard while Joshua Henne, a Democratic strategist, owns the other half.

"Our lawn was definitely confusing people," says Henne, 41, about their campaign-clashing yard on a busy street in Shrewsbury.

In 2014, Henne and Hoffman worked on several competing statewide campaigns, but had never met. When a national reporter asked Henne to recommend a moderate GOP consultant for an interview, he contacted Hoffman. She says she was suspicious, only knowing Henne from his Twitter feed and opinion pieces where "he's a very snarky Democrat who takes on Republicans." But they had a nice conversation and Hoffman returned the favor several months later, recommending Henne for a media interview. The pair decided to meet for a drink during the annual state Chamber of Commerce train trip to Washington, D.C., but a blizzard canceled the networking rail ride. The drink eventually happened in East Brunswick; they talked for four hours.

The couple went public by posting a photo on Facebook. "This should be fun to watch," was the amused reaction from Trenton types, recalls Hoffman. The pair discovered quickly they shared the same goals and core values. "We just disagree a little bit on the best way to get there," says Hoffman, 43. "But I could never be with someone who didn't care about politics or issues."

Married in 2016, the couple still toils on opposite sides of the aisle, but won't work on opposing electoral campaigns. "We're not going to pull punches on things we care about, but we're also going to be respectful," says Henne.

The duo says they emphasize open communication and respect, and agree on the importance of family and how to raise their four children, two from Jeanette's previous marriage, whatever political party the kids may join someday. "We just want them to be open-minded and hear everything and make their own decisions," says Hoffman.

The couple's friends, though, have other ideas. Several gave stuffed elephants as gifts when Hoffman gave birth to a son in 2017 and a daughter in 2018. "It was definitely on purpose," says Henne. ■



Jeanette Hoffman once viewed future husband Joshua Henne as a "snarky Democrat," but their mutual interest in politics proved essential to their marriage.



Sharon Waters is a writer living in Bloomfield.