

Pint-sized campaigner becomes Constitution advocate

By TRISH CHOATE, Scripps Howard News Service
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Cathy Travis was pulling a little red wagon when she got started in politics. The Capitol Hill veteran of today still has a lot in common with that 8- to 12-year-old girl who made the rounds of turtle races and catfish fries in Arkansas to hand out campaign literature from her wagon.

"When I was a little bitty kid I wanted to be part of something bigger that helped people," Travis, press secretary for a U.S. representative, said.

Her passion for politics led her to write "Constitution Translated for Kids," a book drawing attention as Constitution Day nears Sept. 17.

The book is aimed at fifth-graders and gives a side-by-side, easy-to-understand translation of the document signed Sept. 17, 1787.

"It makes it into something that it is to begin with," Sandra Winslow, president of the Rhode Island Federation of Republican Women, said. "It's a living document. It's not something that we should be looking at as history and nothing else."

The federation has undertaken a project with state's bipartisan Legislative Civic Education Commission to celebrate Constitution Day. They're aiming to get a copy of "Constitution Translated for Kids" in every fourth- and fifth-grade classroom in the state. They felt getting the books to Rhode Island schoolchildren was something they "wanted to do for the good of our country and our state," Norma Willis, president of the Newport Council of the federation and membership chairwoman for the federation, said.

The Republican group's members were unfazed by the fact that Travis works for U.S. Rep. Solomon P. Ortiz - a Democrat from Corpus Christi, Texas.

"Well, that doesn't make any difference," Winslow said. "This isn't political at all."

But there was a concern before Travis recently visited Rhode Island.

"The one thing we don't want to do is get a test when you show up," Winslow told her. Unless, that is, the book was in hand.

The book is dotted with "Fast Facts," interesting historical nuggets. It also includes a timeline, an explanation of how the electoral college works and a side-by-side translation of the Bill of Rights and the other amendments.

It's all in language that, well, even an adult can understand.

"Everybody's getting an education with Cathy's book, from young people to older people, because now they understand what they're reading," Ortiz said. "And I think when you understand ... it makes you want to know more about our history of the Constitution and of our country."

For instance, here's the Second Amendment in the original 1700s language: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

Here's Travis's take: "Since we need a militia (National Guard) to protect the country, citizens can own firearms (guns)."

Travis also wrote a teachers guide, available on the Internet at <http://www.connectforkids.org/node/4521>, to go with the book. Her Web site is at www.constitutionEZ.com.

Published by Synergy Books of Austin, Texas, the book was re-released in April. At a book signing in Washington, she spotted an old friend, "Uncle Bill" - not literally her uncle but probably a distant cousin.

It was Bill Alexander who Travis and younger sister M'Lisa campaigned for as children. Now a Washington lobbyist, he served as U.S. representative for the Arkansas First District from 1969 to 1993.

"Will you vote for my Uncle Bill?" elementary-school-age Travis would say during campaign outings.

"Why sure, honey. Tell me a little bit about him," her latest victim would say, hooked by the junior campaigner.

"This is his picture," the little girl would say. "Hang on a minute. He's good for stuff. I think he's real good."

Decades later, Travis is still talking, explaining and translating politics and government for the rest of us.