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Politics

In Kentucky Senate race, Bill Clinton plays a starring role

Campaign 2016

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State of the 2016 race

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By **Philip Rucker** February 23, 2014

During Bill Clinton's first-inaugural festivities, a 14-year-old girl from Kentucky presented the new president with an honorary bouquet of red roses at the base of the Lincoln Memorial.

Two decades later, that girl, Alison Lundergan Grimes, is a candidate to become Kentucky's first female senator. And Clinton — an uncle figure whom Grimes counts as a friend, mentor and adviser — is playing a [starring role in her campaign](#) and will appear at a sold-out [Grimes fundraiser Tuesday](#).

As Grimes weighed whether to run for the Senate, Clinton took nearly an hour out of a visit last year to Owensboro, Ky., to huddle privately with her. Hillary Rodham Clinton provided her counsel as well. They both offered their unconditional support and talked about how much fight it will take for a Democrat to unseat Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, a wily campaigner known for vilifying his opponents.

"I think what the Clinton family, from President Clinton to Secretary Clinton, and I have in common is that we don't scare easy — no matter the bully," Grimes said in an interview. She added that Clinton's presidency left an indelible impression on her and that she is now "a strong Kentucky woman" hoping to follow his lead.

Celebrated as a star recruit in an otherwise troublesome midterm election year for her party, Grimes is living proof that the Clintons, both now out of office, remain the first family in Democratic politics. At 35, Grimes is just 15 months older than their daughter, Chelsea Clinton, and is practically the Clintons' political offspring. A win in November would demonstrate the appeal of Clintonian centrism in Republican territory.

While President Obama's [approval rating in Kentucky](#) is in the mid-30s, Bill Clinton — with his Southern roots and love of college basketball and horse racing — is popular in the Bluegrass State, which he carried

in both of his presidential elections. Tuesday's Louisville fundraiser for Grimes, Kentucky's secretary of state, will be Clinton's first campaign event for 2014.

"He's got a big following there, as does Hillary," Kentucky's Democratic governor, Steve Beshear, said in an interview. "It's a big boost for Alison to have President Clinton come in for her."

Obama, on the other hand, is unlikely to campaign in the commonwealth, he said. "My guess is that he would say to Alison Grimes, 'You know, I'll be for you or against you, whichever will help you the most,'" Beshear said.

For more than two decades, Clinton has collected and tended to political friends in Kentucky — chief among them, Jerry Lundergan, Grimes's father. They got to know each other well in the 1980s when Lundergan was a state legislator and state Democratic Party chairman and Clinton was the governor of nearby Arkansas, laying the early groundwork for a presidential run.

Friends of both men said Lundergan was a gregarious go-getter who raised money, recruited volunteers and whipped up votes for Clinton's campaigns.

"Jerry is like a person who would attempt to sell anything," said family friend Dave Cartmell, the mayor of Maysville, Ky., Lundergan's hometown. "There's an old term that we use around here, hucksterism, and I use that in a good sense."

Friend John Morgan, a Kentucky-born trial lawyer and Clinton fundraiser, said of Lundergan, "You just meet him and, boom! He's explosive, in a good way. He's got a million-dollar smile, he's never met a stranger and he is a true man in full."

Clinton also was drawn to Lundergan's rags-to-riches tale: He grew up manning the family's lemonade stands at carnivals and county fairs and turned the business into a [hospitality empire](#) that caters lavish affairs, including Pope John Paul II's 1987 trip to Texas, multiple presidential inaugurations and Chelsea Clinton's wedding in 2010.

"It's all a Bill and Jerry thing," said [Al Cross](#), a longtime political columnist at the Louisville Courier-Journal. "You have a couple of guys who believe in old-fashioned Democratic principles of working hard and playing by the rules — and if you skirt a rule a little bit, we'll just wink at you and move on. They're both believers in redemption."

For Lundergan, his daughter's campaign is the ultimate redemption. In 1989, he was forced to resign from the General Assembly under a cloud of scandal. Lundergan violated ethics laws by accepting a no-bid state contract for his catering company, Lundy's, although he avoided a prison sentence.

Lundergan's deep political network has been helpful to his daughter, but his past record cuts both ways. Asked about Lundergan, McConnell's campaign shared a negative research dossier titled, "A CONTROVERSIAL FATHER."

Through the 1990s, Lundergan tried but failed to win back his state House seat. He returned as state party chairman in the mid-2000s, frequently inviting the Clintons to Kentucky to raise money.

"You'd be talking to Jerry and his phone would ring and he'd say, 'Oh, this is Bill, I've got to take this,' and I'm thinking, 'Oh, my gosh, it's President Clinton,'" said state Rep. Joni Jenkins, who served under Lundergan as state party vice chairwoman.

In 2008, Lundergan chaired Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in Kentucky. She beat Obama decisively in the primary, carrying 118 of 120 counties. Bill Clinton stumped all across Kentucky for his wife, and Lundergan was constantly at his side.

During one long day of campaigning, Lundergan arranged for Clinton to stop by a Dairy Queen near Maysville, population 9,000, according to several people who were there. The campaign did not publicize the visit, but after Lundergan called to alert the restaurant, word blew through town and hundreds of folks gathered in the parking lot.

But Clinton's Secret Service agents did not want to stop at the Dairy Queen and drove straight through to the next event, a rally in Morehead. Lundergan, furious that they would skip his hometown, persuaded Clinton to order his security detail to turn the motorcade around.

Clinton soon pulled into the Dairy Queen and ordered a Blizzard. He shook hands with the kitchen staff and plucked french fries straight out of the deep-fryer basket. (This was before he got more health-conscious; he now is a vegan.) Then he walked out to the parking lot and stirred up the crowd.

"He can sing the Kentucky song," said Terry McBrayer, a former Democratic politician and Clinton friend who introduced him that day from the bed of a pickup truck. "People down here relate to Bill Clinton. It's one of those natural fits."

In recent years, Clinton has made several visits to Kentucky to help the Lundergan family, including appearances at charity benefits for Jerry and at a youth environmental forum that Alison addressed as secretary of state.

“Even if he visits and just gives a speech, [Clinton and Lundergan] usually get a game of cards in,” said Jack Conway, Kentucky’s Democratic attorney general.

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Clinton’s Kentucky friendships extend beyond the political realm. John Calipari, coach of the University of Kentucky’s men’s basketball team, said he has been close to Clinton since 1994, when the team he was coaching then, the University of Massachusetts, [upset](#) the president’s beloved University of Arkansas in an early season game.

Calipari, now living in Lexington, sees Lundergan at Mass each morning at Cathedral of Christ the King. In 2012, after Kentucky won the NCAA championship, Clinton visited with the team.

“He was so gracious to us that we got him one of our national championship rings,” Calipari said.

The next year, when the University of Louisville basketball team took home the NCAA championship, Clinton reached out to another old friend: Louisville Coach Rick Pitino, who over the years has brought in Clinton for locker room pep talks.

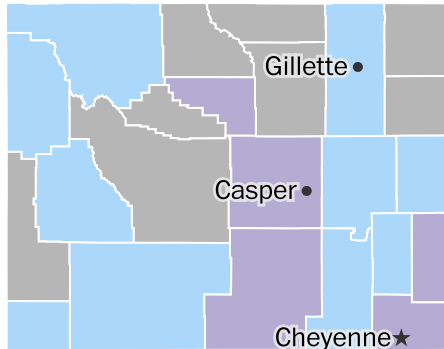
“I had 168 text messages and 34 phone messages, and I only kept one,” Pitino said. “It said, ‘Hey, Rick, this is Bill Clinton. I’m in Abu Dhabi and I set my alarm at 5 in the morning to watch the game. It was wonderful. We’re so proud of you and the team.’ I remembered every line.”

Philip Rucker is a national political correspondent for The Washington Post, where he has reported since 2005.

100.0% reporting

Wyoming Democratic primary

Leader Winner



CANDIDATE	VOTES [?]	%
Sanders [☑]	156	55.7%
Clinton	124	44.3%

14 delegates

Source: AP

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