



Liz and Gerald Benjamin.

Life with the Benjamins

Father and daughter, talking shop

GERALD BENJAMIN, WHO knows more about state politics and government than a roomful of elected officials, was sitting at a Kingston coffee shop last week, regaling his interviewer with tales of a self-described hobbyhorse of his: the need for a state constitutional convention.

Benjamin's daughter Liz strode into the shop and gave her father a smile and hug. In an instant, something more than a parental connection had been made. The two fell to talking as if they'd been doing so for hours beforehand.

All the interviewer could do was sit back and try to keep up with the machine-gun pace of a conversation that has been going on for much more than a few hours.

A bit of biographic backstory, for anyone who may not know either Benjamin. He is emeritus professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz, the rare academic who

has put his theories to work as an elected county official. In addition to serving as the county's legislative chairman, he was instrumental in abolishing that form of local government for the "county executive" form now in place. He is currently Associate Vice President for Regional Engagement and Director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. The Benjamin Center is the college's primary effort to raise its level of engagement within communities, governments, not-for-profits and businesses across the Hudson Valley.

She is best-known as the no-nonsense, comprehensively knowledgeable host of Capital Tonight, New York's only statewide political program that airs nightly on TWC (now Spectrum) News. She's also the creator and editor of "State of Politics," the show's companion blog. Before joining TWC, Benjamin worked for 10 years as a reporter and columnist at the *Albany*

Times Union, where she launched "Capitol Confidential" — the first blog focused on state politics operating out of the Capitol, which is still running strong today.

When they talk about the day's events, it's almost as if they're speaking in code, in smart, overlapping dialog right out of a Robert Altman movie. Names — "Carl," "Shelly," "Astorino" — pop up out of a word cloud rife mysterious abbreviations like "421A" "OCFS" and phrases like "Deadlines that weren't real deadlines," or "Buffalo Billion."

The interviewer prayed his balky digital recorder was catching it all, because he sure wasn't.

Turning to her putative interrogator, Liz said "People ask me if I get sick of it all, it's so boring, it's like Groundhog Day, but it isn't, every year is different."

AS WAS LIZ, in her early years. She said she had no interest in journalism or politics while attending New Paltz High School. She thought she'd study environmental law and become a lawyer.

"I didn't even read the paper," she said. That changed when, while attending the University of Rochester, her father sent her a subscription to *The New York Times*.

A few years later, following the usual peripatetic route traveled by so many post-graduate twenty-somethings, she found herself back in New Paltz, waitressing at the Plaza Diner. She'd applied for a job at the paper at what was then the *Huguenot Herald* (now *New Paltz Times*). As it happened, Geddy Sveikauskas, the paper's owner, stopped by the diner for breakfast one day and thought he recognized her as Gerald Benjamin's daughter. He asked her what she was doing there.

"I'm serving you eggs," she recalled saying, in characteristic deadpan.

Soon, she was serving up stories of school board meetings and local government shenanigans for the *Herald*, where she said, she got "the bug" to be a journalist.

By the late '90s, she was grigging for a Newport, Rhode Island paper, then taking a quantum career leap, writing political columns and blogging for the *New York Daily News* before moving to Albany and carving out a career there.

If there's a theme to her professional life, you'd have to call it "challenge." At the age of 44, she's run two Iron Man competitions and most recently entered a statewide body building competition — activities not traditionally associated with either politics or journalism.

After regaling her listeners with tales of the world of body-building ("I can't believe someone hasn't done a reality show about it"), she grew pensive.

"I don't know how much longer I can do (journalism) — the time commitment, and with these young people who are working 24/7, I'm 44 and I'm married and, you know..."

"People say why haven't you gone national and while I haven't had the opportunity I haven't pursued it either. I have a marriage and a father; I don't know how long he'll be around (to which she and he both smile and rap the wooden table)."

She knows what it would require to go national, to be on call, to have a bag always packed and be ready to hit the road... "I saw the national anchors at the conventions? They were strung out."

She recalled seeing old-school anchor Tom Brokaw last summer, "sitting at a bar, drinking alone, looking like shit — he was like this celebrated, amazing guy and guess what, we all get old."

THEN, AS QUICKLY as the conversation pivoted from journalism to body building to career speculation, it veered back to familiar — and least to the Benjamins — ground: the almost laughably dreadful state of the legislature's annual budget battle. It's a discussion that always has an historical aspect when Dad's around.

He's reminded of how state workers during the state budget crisis in the '70s received paychecks checks that said "this check is not a check..."

Liz picks up on his observation, her head bobbing in agreement as she wonders what role, if any exists, legislatures can

play in the budget process when faced with “King Kong governors.”

This brings her father back to his hobbyhorse, an opportunity to challenge Kong’s dominant role through a constitutional convention. But no, he said, with a melodramatic roll of his eyes. “They’re so dumb, they don’t know their own interests, they don’t know their self-contradictions, they just go down this path of conventionality . . .”

“ . . . Which is why you’re for publicly funded elections, right?”

Her father grins and nods, as if to say “Ta dah!”

The back-and-forth ends — momentarily — with a characteristically explosive laugh from her father. After Liz fields a brief phone call, both Benjamins turn to the interviewer.

Liz: “So, any questions?”

The interviewer confesses he’s been lost in the dust of their exchange, which brings another explosive laugh from Gerry. They’re both well acquainted with confused looks.

“This happens because I’m in the family business,” said Liz. “Nobody wants to hang out with us in our family because this is what we do. We try to temper it, you know. But regular people are not as deep in the weeds as we are. But the thing is, we honestly enjoy it. It’s like a riff, oh did you know this, oh did you know this. . .”

“We can take it on the road!!” said her father.

“It would be a great three-o’clock-in-the morning radio show!”

Explosive laugh number three.

Then they’re off again, back in the weeds, with no more need or desire to explain themselves. The laughter and enjoyment they so obviously take in each other’s company needs no further explanation.

— *Jeremiah Horrigan*