

## First Lady, First Advocate

### An In-Depth Interview with Colorado's Jeannie Ritter

Jeannie Ritter sent waves of excitement through CPA when she chose mental health as her special initiative during her tenure as First Lady. For the past 2½ years, she has traveled extensively throughout the state visiting programs, listening to consumers and providers, and speaking about the value of mental health services to the citizens of Colorado. Although she insists that she is not an expert, Mrs. Ritter has some valuable advice to offer psychologists about collegiality, building capacity, and strengthening our influence among the public and lawmakers. Her perspective on the state of the state in mental health will be featured in the August edition of *The Colorado Psychologist*.

Here and now, CPA members can look to the First Lady as a model of personal integrity and political courage. When Mrs. Ritter publicly committed to mental health a mere six days after her husband was inaugurated, she was disregarding advice she had received from other gubernatorial spouses shortly after the election. They explicitly recommended waiting six months before selecting an issue. But Mrs. Ritter didn't need six months to evaluate the relative political benefits of competing causes, because she already knew from her own life experiences that mental illness needed a champion, precisely because it is socially neglected and politically unglamorous. Her sister Susie has lived with bipolar disorder for many years and Mrs. Ritter had experienced first-hand the difficulties of finding treatment for a family member without insurance. With a husband in law enforcement, she had already seen the deadly toll of untreated depression among police officers. And she admits that she herself has struggled with anxiety, a problem that has grown more serious now that she is on the public stage full-time.



Some Democratic loyalists expressed polite concern about acknowledging the need for emotional supports. Mrs. Ritter tells an amusing anecdote about giving an interview while her husband was running for governor. When the journalist asked about what she does to take care of herself, she responded that she'd hired someone to help clean the house, she started practicing yoga, and she'd begun seeing a counselor. One of the press liaisons in the governor's office said, "Wait, wait, wait! Maybe you don't want to say that!" Mrs. Ritter was astounded and retorted, "You can't be serious! This is my initiative! This is the point I'm trying to make. What are the strategies you can put in place? I've just named three of them, you know? And I'm not ashamed of any of them."

Mrs. Ritter admires Diane Patrick, the first lady of Massachusetts, who checked herself into the hospital with a serious depression, just six weeks after her husband took the oath of office. Rather than hide the nature of her illness, Mrs. Patrick told her husband to tell the public where she was. Mrs. Ritter commented, “She did two brilliant things, got help and said it’s okay to get it.” Mrs. Ritter was tapped by the Campaign for Mental Health Reform to give Mrs. Patrick an award at their conference a few months ago.



*First Lady Jeannie Ritter (left) presents Campaign Award to Massachusetts First Lady Diane Patrick, March 2009.*

Mrs. Ritter also feels thoroughly supported by her husband, Bill Ritter. When her sister Susie was in transition and doing poorly a few months ago, they “had to swoop in” and bring her to live with them. “Thank God we have a governor or I have a husband who says we can do this.” Her sister permits discussion of her struggle with bipolar in the press and sometimes attends official mental health events in the Boettcher Mansion. Inviting a family member with a major mental illness to live openly in the governor’s residence may turn out to be one of the first lady’s most powerful blows against stigma.

Mrs. Ritter has no regrets about choosing an unwieldy issue like mental health for her focus, though she admits it has been challenging. The day after her husband was elected, the phone began ringing with one group after another calling to ask her to attend functions and speak out on their cause. It was overwhelming. At a new governor’s conference before the term started, an experienced gubernatorial spouse told her, “No, this is easy. Once you choose your initiative, that’s what drives your calendar... You don’t have to be all over the map.” Yet Mrs. Ritter’s experience has been just the opposite. “Well, I chose mine and what happens? Everybody gets to me because mental health intersects with everything. It didn’t focus [my calendar] at all, but that then became the point, didn’t it?”

Mrs. Ritter has indeed been all over the map. She meets with hospital administrators in Denver whose budgets are buckling under the weight of psychiatric costs. She sits down with judicial officials, and substance abuse workers, and the Colorado Nurses Association, and early intervention teachers, and support groups for postpartum depression, and emergency responders, and the list lengthens with each passing month.

She recently promoted a workshop on menopause where half of the participants said they were facing depression. She recognizes that sticking with a more circumscribed initiative -like the first gentleman’s mentoring program in Michigan- might have been more advantageous. “Unfortunately, I have chosen an issue where I’m not going to have a very easy time measuring my impact, and I’m just going to have to live with that then, and I can.”

Fortitude and persistence are indispensable qualities for a first lady who has the misfortune of leading the charge during a time of shrinking budgets. University Hospital’s decision to close its psychiatric ward was a high-profile setback. Colorado had already fallen to the 49<sup>th</sup> place in the country for state funding of mental health services when the Ritters entered office. But recently, a woman at Children’s Hospital pointed her finger at Mrs. Ritter and denounced, “and now we’re 50<sup>th</sup>!”

Mrs. Ritter takes comfort in the belief that the governor’s administration did the best they could to protect mental health funding during the last round of budget negotiations. Every situation is an opportunity to promote mental health, even during budget cutting. She also believes she is making consistent progress in raising mental health literacy. Just like in the old science films that illustrated dye slowly permeating smaller and smaller blood vessels in the body, talking about mental health spreads ever more awareness. “That’s how this conversation feels. It just keeps finding more little crevasses and more places that it highlights.” She would be delighted if strategies to enhance emotional wellness could one day be discussed as casually among people as formerly taboo topics like birth control are now. Sometimes she thinks psychology’s sensitivity to confidentiality has inadvertently discouraged people from talking openly about their needs and treatment.



*Jeannie Ritter listens in La Junta*

Mrs. Ritter certainly practices what she preaches. When asked how she ensures her own wellbeing, she answers thoughtfully and completely. She acknowledges she has the same

potential “to come undone” like anyone else and consequently, she has put several supports in place. After walking regularly for many years, she discovered yoga. And even though she only did “poor man’s yoga at the rec center,” she claims that “yoga saved her life.” It has helped keep anxiety at bay as her days have grown increasingly public and pressured. She now rolls out of bed before 6AM twice a week to attend a yoga class that she helped organize in the carriage house on the grounds of the mansion.

She has also seen a nutritionist who has recommended some fundamental changes. No more drinking only caffeine all morning. No more skipping breakfast and eating a pastry at 10AM. The nutritionist also recommended an herbal supplement to take before speaking engagements to minimize nervousness.

Drawing on her religious faith, Mrs. Ritter is also exploring meditation as a mental complement to a vigorous yoga practice. “I don’t know if [my attempts] count as meditation yet. I try just to be still and try gently to keep my mind just open and still.” With meditation has come enhanced self-reflection and more refined self-direction. “Both Bill and I are really fortunate. [We] have a lot of energy. I can really go hard and strong. In a way, that didn’t serve me because I was reckless in how I chose to use that energy. It didn’t matter. You know, I had the sense that it was limitless. So, now I’m older, and I realize that it is a finite amount. That it is a finite source for me. It isn’t bottomless. So, the whole beauty now of discerning how I use my energy, that’s been the real gift.”

Mrs. Ritter views her holistic approach to wellness as an ideal model for mental health. “I can speak from the consumer’s side. I think consumers, as we get more and more comfortable with this idea of ...putting supports in place, getting some therapy, some treatment, that people have options. So, if I say the word ‘alternative,’ I don’t just mean alternatives, but options. ...I do suffer from anxiety, but I can stop drinking coffee and take care of about a third of that anxiety just by eliminating [coffee]. And then I can work on a little bit more by putting in place an exercise program. And then I can chip away at some more of that just by my acupuncturist, and my counselor on speed dial.”

Two years remain in the governor’s term and four additional years are a possibility. No matter what the outcome of the 2010 election is, Mrs. Ritter is sufficiently grounded to know the direction she herself must move in. She matter-of-factly related that Bill and she have two more children to send to college and she cannot delay until 2014 to bring home a paycheck again. She will need paid employment soon. She would like to find a position in the public sector to capitalize on her interests and valuable experience.

Job or no job, the work she has been doing promoting emotional wellness is far too important to her and her family to drop. Nor does she plan to retire when she eventually moves out of the Boettcher Mansion. “When it is all said and done, actually, I hope to always be a mental health advocate. You know, you meet Tipper Gore and Roselyn Carter, they have not let up.” And Mrs. Ritter, who seems to be getting stronger and wiser as the term goes on, does not seem the type to let up either. She has been involved in initiating several projects that she would like to see through. Regardless of her husband’s

political fortunes or her own work commitments, expect to see Jeannie Ritter reigning for years to come as Colorado's First Lady of Mental Health.