The Ann Romney story

**ANN ROMNEY'S SWEETHEART DEAL SHE DECIDED HER LOVE OF 30 YEARS SHOULD BE SENATOR**

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BELMONT -- At the million-dollar mansion of Mitt Romney here, Ann Romney sits on a leather sofa, and after answering questions for more than an hour, she peeks at her watch. Then, with a smile made of dimples and dentistry, she explains that it is time for her to change clothes for a meeting of the Republican Town Committee in Reading, where she will recite, once again, as she has nearly every night for the past year, the reasons why she believes Massachusetts and America will benefit if her husband is elected to the Senate seat that has been occupied by Edward Kennedy for a third of a century. As if on cue, her exit is dramatized by a crescendo from a nearby room where her son is at the piano, practicing a sonata in C minor by Beethoven. At the far end hangs a portrait of Mitt and Ann Romney that is, in its perfection, eerie. He is perfectly handsome. She is perfectly beautiful. The background and lighting are impeccable. They are dressed flawlessly. No cowlicks, no wrinkles, no moles, not even a freckle.

From the shadows, one imagines Rod Serling stepping forward:

"Welcome to the perfect town of Belmont and to this perfect home. Meet Mitt and Ann Romney, high school sweethearts still perfectly in love. Both intelligent. Both well-educated. Both millionaires. Their five sons are hale and handsome, and if the family dog, McKenzie, looks puzzled, he may be wondering how he arrived in this perfect place and what he's doing in . . . the Twilight Zone."

When the question is posed to Ann about perfection, she laughs.

"You know, it's a beautiful picture, but we still have struggles and conflict, and we still deal with the same things that one deals with. The most important thing to us is family and our relationship and the esteem of our peers."

OK, but there must be an aspect that needs improvement.

"Well, Mitt and I are always thinking about self-improvement, and we like to think of ourselves as progressing all the time. But the perfect family? We don't think of ourselves that way. There are so many people we know and care about that always have struggled. At this point, what I would love is to spend more time helping others. Most of our lives, Mitt and I have tried to set aside time for volunteer work, but with the campaign, we can't. So, it's a selfish period where we have no time for anybody and hardly time for our children, and so I very much miss the fullness of that part of my life."

What if one of your sons announced that he wanted to marry a black woman? Or that he was gay?

She does not hesitate.

"You love your children, no matter what. Nothing changes that, and what you want is their happiness."

Would she try to talk her sons out of gayness, or out of an interracial marriage?

"If they did that, they would obviously have reached the point where they had made the decision, and so, you love your children no matter what. It shocks me that people turn away from children when they make tough decisions. You sometimes hear that if someone joins a religious faith, parents vow not to speak to them. Why do that? Why deny yourself the blessings of associating with children or anybody else you love because they made a choice that may not be exactly what you would choose?"

Let's try a different approach. Do you and Mitt ever argue?

She smiles.

"You know, I hate to answer this, but no. Isn't that awful? It's like we must not have a relationship if we don't argue, but we never have, never a serious argument, and we've known each other since I was 15 years old.

"We did have one argument, but it was before marriage, when I thought he was being too possessive, when I wasn't really understanding that he was just so in love with me and so committed. I was 17, and we had a real argument. But that was the last one. Isn't that strange? It's like people might think there's something wrong with our relationship."

Have you ever yelled at one another?

The question surprises her.

"Mitt has never once raised his voice to me."

And if he did?

"I'd dissolve into tears."

From the kitchen, where her son is carving a papaya, Ann Lois Romney, 45, leads the way into the library, turns on a light and closes the door on the dog, McKenzie.

"He always wants to sit in on interviews," she says, settling into the sofa. "He gets more press."

Although the Senate campaign is her first experience under the media microscope, she answers with composure.

"The campaign? Invigorating. Exciting. The big surprise for me? Well, Mitt has one of the most outstanding business records, and for Ted Kennedy to make that into a negative is astonishing.

"And yes, we have had to sacrifice privacy as a family, but we have such a core confidence as to who we are, and we have seen Mitt's father, when he was governor of Michigan, go from being in the spotlight of a presidential campaign and then back to being a normal person. That was helpful, because, as he says, politics is the best way to go from who's who to who's that?"

She is still irritated that her family's Mormon faith became an issue in the campaign.

"That was terribly inappropriate and enormously hurtful to our family. Why? Because it's insulting to me, as a woman, to be told that I'm a second- class citizen. Enormously insulting. But our boys are so grounded and so mature that none of this is going to impact them, although I do worry about my little one, my 13-year-old. It's hardest on him. It would be nice if he were older. You don't want them to think somehow they're different."

Childhood for Ann Romney sounds like a rerun of "Father Knows Best," with Ozzie and Harriet living on one side, the Cleavers on the other and Donna Reed across the street.

Weston is the Massachusetts town, she says, that most resembles Bloomfield Hills, Mich., where she grew up with two brothers, her mother and her father, a Welsh immigrant, businessman, engineer, mayor and inventor.

"He was a creative genius. Everything he looked at he'd try to make better. We had a sliding door, and he'd get mad at us for not closing it, so he built a pulley system with weights so the sliding door would close automatically."

By the time she was in the seventh grade, the family was wealthy enough for her to attend private school.

"I wasn't interested in academics till college. I was more interested in riding my horses, and I was extremely athletic. I played field hockey, lacrosse, basketball. I swam, skied, played tennis and even now, I exercise three times a week, aerobics, muscle toning, and I play tennis at Belmont Hill Club."

Despite what her husband describes as her excellent physical condition, Ann is obsessive about her weight and, according to her husband, probably hasn't been on a scale for 15 years.

"Don't ask about it," she says. "I won't answer. I'll tell my age, but not my weight. A woman's weight is always more than she wants it to be. I'll tell you what my ideal is. I'm 5 feet 8. In college, I weighed 117. That's what I should be. But I'm never near that. I'm always shocked at how much I weigh. I'm thin, but not 117 pounds, so I'm not as thin as I should be.

"I had two brothers and now I have five sons, so I never had sisters, never had daughters. All my life I have been surrounded by men and boys, so I'm used to roughhousing, although I've managed to maintain my femininity."

There was no way for either of them to know, but a passionate conversation between Ann and her father a few days before he died would alter the course of Massachusetts politics.

If they made a movie of the romance of Mitt and Ann Romney, Frank Capra would direct and leading roles would go to Frankie Avalon and Sandra Dee.

They were students, Mitt and Ann, at private schools across a lake, and when they met at a party one night in 1965, he was 18 and she was 15.

"I caught his eye," she recalls with pleasure, "and he never let me go. I mean, he hotly pursued me, and we dated through high school. Did we date others? No, it was total romance. It was just one of those things that he -- that we really fell, actually, deeply in love in high school, although we didn't tell anyone, because no one would have believed it.

"What attracted me to Mitt was his sense of humor. He was funny, and fun to be with. No matter where he was, there was a lot of action. In high school, we water-skied almost every day. He taught me to water ski, I taught him to snow ski. When he went to Stanford, his parents didn't want him to work. They wanted him to concentrate on studies. So, the first thing he did was get a job as chauffeur on campus, and made enough money so he could fly home and see me.

"He didn't want his parents to know. They had no idea he was coming home weekends. Mitt's father was governor and staying in Lansing, so Mitt just stayed at the family house. Once we ended up at a party and saw Mitt's parents, but they didn't see us, because as soon as we saw them, we made a U- turn and left."

In 1966, Mitt decided to interrupt his education for 30 months of missionary service for the Mormon Church in France.

"Did I feel smothered by Mitt? No. I had boys pursuing me and I dated while Mitt was gone, but I was never interested in anyone else. Mitt really stole my heart from the very first."

Raised as an Episcopalian, Ann waited until Mitt was abroad before she joined the Mormon Church.

"Mitt didn't want me to join just for him, and he didn't want me to be influenced by him. What drew me to it? When Mitt and I were dating, I'd ask him what he believed in, and I was touched by his faith and by the precepts."

On the day of his return in November 1968, waiting at the Detroit airport with 30 of his relatives, Ann was apprehensive. Would he feel the same? Would she?

"When he walked off the plane, he made a beeline for me, grabbed me and barely spoke to anyone else. On the drive home, we were jammed in the back of a station wagon for an hour and a remarkable thing happened. It was as though time dissolved and we were back where we'd been years earlier. By the time we got home, we were talking marriage."

With the exception of Mitt's father, everyone in the family was so shocked that a meeting was held to dissuade the young lovers.

As Mitt recalled a few days ago, "Ann's mother said she was convinced I was not good enough for Ann, and actually, as time went on, she remained convinced of it. She used to say that Ann is an angel, and the amazing thing is that Ann is an angel. I can't think of a weakness. She really is extraordinary."

Mitt and Ann prevailed, however. Because Mitt's father had been governor of Michigan and a presidential candidate, the wedding in March 1969 had political flavor. Among 250 guests was former President Ford. President Nixon wired congratulations.

After a honeymoon in Hawaii, Ann returned to studies at Brigham Young University, and Mitt joined her for a semester, fell in love with BYU and transferred from Stanford.

"They were not easy years. You have to understand, I was raised in a lovely neighborhood, as was Mitt, and at BYU, we moved into a $62-a-month basement apartment with a cement floor and lived there two years as students with no income.

"It was tiny. And I didn't have money to carpet the floor. But you can get remnants, samples, so I glued them together, all different colors. It looked awful, but it was carpeting.

"We were happy, studying hard. Neither one of us had a job, because Mitt had enough of an investment from stock that we could sell off a little at a time.

"The stock came from Mitt's father. When he took over American Motors, the stock was worth nothing. But he invested Mitt's birthday money year to year -- it wasn't much, a few thousand, but he put it into American Motors because he believed in himself. Five years later, stock that had been $6 a share was $96 and Mitt cashed it so we could live and pay for education.

"Mitt and I walked to class together, shared housekeeping, had a lot of pasta and tuna fish and learned hard lessons.

"I made a mistake in taking a class with him, then decided never again. He graduated first in his class, and he's so extraordinarily bright that he was always the brightest. If you were in his class, he'd bring down your grade, blow the curve.

"We had our first child in that tiny apartment. We couldn't afford a desk, so we used a door propped on sawhorses in our bedroom. It was a big door, so we could study on it together. And we bought a portable crib, took the legs off and put it on the desk while we studied. I had a baby sitter during class time, but otherwise, I'd hold my son on my lap while I studied.

"The funny thing is that I never expected help. My father had become wealthy through hard work, as did Mitt's father, but I never expected our parents to take care of us. They'd visit, laugh and say, 'We can't believe you guys are living like this.' They'd take us out to dinner, have a good time, then leave.

"We stayed till Mitt graduated in 1971, and when he was accepted at Harvard Law, we came east. He was also accepted at Harvard Business School as part of a joint program that admits 25 a year, so he was getting degrees from Harvard Law and Business schools at the same time.

"Remember, we'd been paying $62 a month rent, but here, rents were $400, and for a dump. This is when we took the now-famous loan that Mitt talks about from his father and bought a $42,000 home in Belmont, and you know? The mortgage payment was less than rent. Mitt saw that the Boston market was behind Chicago, LA and New York. We stayed there seven years and sold it for $90,000, so we not only stayed for free, we made money. As I said, Mitt's very bright.

"Another son came along 18 months later, although we waited four years to have the third, because Mitt was still in school and we had no income except the stock we were chipping away at. We were living on the edge, not entertaining. No, I did not work. Mitt thought it was important for me to stay home with the children, and I was delighted.

"Right after Mitt graduated in 1975, we had our third boy and it was about the time Mitt's first paycheck came along. So, we were married a long time before we had any income, about five years as struggling students. Mitt had offers in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, but we loved Boston. One thing led to another, and he went from Boston Consulting Group to Bain & Co., where he became an extraordinarily young partner.

"Now, every once in a while, we say if things get rough, we can go back to a $62-a-month apartment and be happy. All we need is each other and a little corner and we'll be fine."

In the days before he died, Ann's father admonished her to live life to the fullest, and it was the echo of that conversation, she says, that persuaded her that she and Mitt were obliged to achieve something more than wealth.

"My parents both died of cancer, and during their illness, as I was taking care of them, as they were approaching death, well, you take a hard look at life and try to figure out: Who am I? What am I doing? And what's life about? Sometimes, you get so busy living you forget to evaluate where you're going.

"When my dad was in the hospital, I knew that on the third floor, life was coming and on the eighth, he was dying. I thought: We're all in a rotation. We're all here for such a short time. We come, and we go.

"My father was 75 and undergoing chemotherapy and radiation and living in a wing of our house. I loved the time we had. It was precious. One afternoon I was in the kitchen, putting dishes away and he got philosophic. He grabbed me and said, 'You know, life is so exciting and I'm so mad that I'm dying.' He said, 'Ann, you've got so much living to do. Think of the exciting things that will happen in the world. I'm so jealous of all the wonders you're going to see in your lifetime.' "

Ann's eyes glisten with tears.

"Well, that made me pause."

Suddenly, she cannot go on, and the room is silent.

Tears fall to her jacket.

"This is hard for me to talk about."

And then, to aide Ann Murphy: "You'd better get me some Kleenex."

It takes a moment for her to regain her composure.

"My father made me realize that, well, I don't want to look at my life 30 years from now and say, 'Gee, I wish I'd done that.' I don't want to have regrets. I don't want to say, 'I'm sorry we didn't try this or that.' "

A few days later, one morning in bed, she told Mitt that he had to run for Senate. She said that they had enough money, that it was time to take the step. He put the covers over his head and said, "No! No! I don't want to do it . . .

"Now, in speeches, Mitt says all the time, let's hear from Ann. She's the woman who got me into this . . . "

In the back seat of the Chrysler New Yorker leased for the campaign, Ann stretches her legs.

"I insisted we get this car because it's roomy back here."

As the car winds through Reading, along Main Street, USA, past video shops, pizza parlors and honky-tonk bars, the neon lights reflect off her salmon suit, and she talks of family, politics and especially her husband.

On campaigning: "I've always wished that Mitt could understand pregnancy, and a campaign is the closest thing to being pregnant. It has about a nine- month life. It's very painful. It has a lot of ups and downs. At about month seven, you're saying to yourself, 'How can I get out of this?' But then, you know, it's over. The thing that's nice about pregnancy is that in the end, you have a baby."

On getting the news: "I read the Globe and Herald and Newsweek, cover to cover, and The New York Times, usually Sunday, and that's about it. I flip on the news when I'm making breakfast. I watch Channel 4. But I don't want to alienate my friends at 5 and 7. Andy Hiller won't like me and Janet Wu, but I'm used to Jack and Liz, although I flip around."

On running for office: "I have no interest in it. I'm a private person and being this public is hard for me. My interests are with my family and being off by myself. I've seen how ruthless politics can be, and it's not my cup of tea."

The topic turns to the poverty that pervades American cities.

"There are a lot of Reagan Democrats in Roxbury and Dorchester, and they're very much interested in Mitt's campaign. We get a very warm response."

But what about the slums that scar every American city?

"You know, it's just another part of the city. I mean, people live there, they have their lives, they have concerns."

Have you been to Roxbury?

"Yes, and there's parts of Roxbury that are, you know, there's West Roxbury, of course, which is fine, but you're talking about the real rough parts."

Yes.

"Well, you know, it's always sad and you always want everyone to have the same kind of opportunities. You know that every light that shines in every person is just as bright at some point, you know, and you just, it's just sad that they can't have the potential and can't reach the potential everyone deserves. In many ways, they're cheated out of opportunity."

Does government have a role in helping restructure lives of people trapped in poverty?

"Yes, definitely."

But isn't it true that Republicans have a reputation for being less sensitive to issues of race and poverty?

"Right, and for Mitt -- he feels strongly about this -- about re-engaging people left out of the American dream. He sees our country divided between haves and have-nots. He sees it as very explosive, and he is most concerned about bringing these people back into the American system because they really have no hope. They are without hope, and it's very sad.

"How? Through job creation, welfare reform, education reform, and criminal justice reform. So the streets are safe and people have the same educational opportunity. We need to improve our educational system through -- he believes -- school choice, by making schools more competitive and giving the voucher system to those who would like to be able to go to private school, but can't afford to. He feels strongly about that.

"And basic welfare reform, where people work with welfare. And you know, we [shouldn't] incent all the wrong behaviors. Right now, what we're doing is incenting young girls to leave home, to not marry the person they're, you know, having a child with because they won't get the welfare check if they're married, if they're living with a man.

"It's totally insane. So, you've got to incent people to behave in a more appropriate pattern to break the cycle of really inappropriate . . . and life is so precious, you just don't want to cheat these children out of their potential. And they know -- what are the statistics? Ninety percent of children from single-parent homes who grow up in poverty will stay in poverty because they don't have a bridge out of it."

A few days later, Ann is on the telephone and reacting awkwardly to an invitation to describe herself in three words.

"I would think people would call me peaceful . . . "

She pauses.

"I never think of describing myself."

She hesitates again.

"Mitt's upstairs, should I put him on? No? Well, let's see, peaceful . . . loving . . . and serene."

Reminded that John Silber inflicted a disastrous blow on his own campaign by blowing up when WCVB-TV's Natalie Jacobson challenged him to describe his shortcomings, Ann Romney is asked to identify her own weaknesses.

"That's fair. People ought to be able to assess themselves."

Suddenly, she laughs.

"This is funny. Mitt just walked into the room."

And then, in an aside to him: "Sweetheart, he wants to know what my weakness is . . . "

She laughs again.

"Mitt says my weakness is him."