WITH TED KENNEDY AT THE KENNEDY COMPOUND

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**STARTING OVER TED AND VICKI KENNEDY TALK ABOUT LOVE, MARRIAGE -- AND CHOWDER**

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HYANNISPORT -- Outside, the morning sky is slate, and the American flag is snapping in a chilly east wind that whips up whitecaps and slams the surf against the sand in front of the Kennedy compound, while inside, in the living room of the main house, Edward Kennedy, 60, last survivor of the fabled Kennedy brothers and a US senator for 30 years, is describing a few of the photographs crowded atop credenzas and hanging in rows along walls that tell the story, in snapshots, of the astonishing influence his family has exerted on American politics in the second half of the 20th century. ''This is my older brother, Joe, with [Eamon] DeValera just before the war, and that's Cardinal Pacelli, who came to America in '36, I guess. President Rooseve lt asked my father to squire him around, and he later became Pope Pius XII. He sat in that couch there, and I sat on his knee,'' Kennedy says, pointing toward the picture window. ''I received my first Holy Communion from him,'' and then Kennedy adds with self-deprecating humor: ''It's one reason I've done so well spiritually. If it hadn't been for that, I'd be in real trouble.'' As it happens, the man who received his first Holy Communion from the pope at the Vatican is no longer welcome at the communion rail of the Roman Catholic Church, not officially, at least, since July 3, when he married for the second time; she is an attorney, a bright and beautiful woman from Crowley, La., and from a family long friendly with the Kennedys, and as she sweeps into the room, Victoria Reggie Kennedy, 38, smiles and extends her hand and greets you with echoes of an accent that makes you think of Tennessee Williams and front porches with rocking chairs and those hot summer nights when the air is heavy with magnolia and the glasses filled with mint julep.

"It's nice to meet you," she says. "Would you like some coffee, or juice? Or chocolate chip cookies?" a wry allusion to this year's politically correct cookie.

For another in a series of interviews conducted over several days at the compound with reporters from Massachusetts newspapers and television stations, Kennedy is dressed in a double-breasted navy-blue blazer, a striped, button- down shirt open at the collar, and blue cotton workpants a mite short and two mites tight.

But if he resembles something out of Weight Watchers monthly, she appears to have stepped out of Vogue.

She looks smashing, overdressed for Cape Cod, perhaps, in a blue linen double-breasted jacket, a light button down shirt, white silk slacks that are cuffed, white hose and off-white shoes with small heels. Her makeup is impeccable, red lipstick and red nails, and wavy, shoulder-length hair of brown with auburn highlights.

For the interview, the seating is arranged meticulously. With two Kennedy press aides off to the side, Ted and Vicki are seated in easy chairs facing the picture window and facing a reporter and a photographer, and once amenities have been observed, conversation turns to marriage, the second time around.

"I certainly don't think in terms of a comparison," Vicki says. "One of the most wonderful things is how committed we are to spending time together. Even in the midst of the Democratic Convention, which is not exactly being alone, Ted made a point to say that we were going to go out to dinner, just the two of us, which was wonderful and romantic. And after the last speech on Thursday, we took off and went sailing for three days. Even when the Senate was back in session, and meeting late, the children and I would go down there for dinner, or I'd put them to bed, and I'd go down and Ted and I would be together."

This was not, by the way, love at first sight, not by a long shot.

The families have been close since the Democratic Convention of 1956, when Ted was 24 and Vicki 2, and her father swung the Louisiana delegation from Estes Kefauver to Jack Kennedy.

"Love at first sight? Well, no, it wasn't," she says, "but don't you think it's a question of where you are in life? It just so happened that he came to my home for dinner one night to celebrate my parents' 40th wedding anniversary, and he hung out in the kitchen while I cooked, and helped me pick vegetables off the vine for our salad, and we enjoyed each other's company. Maybe we didn't have that opportunity before, but oh, yes, it took me by surprise, oh, absolutely, and the fact that we went out to dinner later was something that just evolved from enjoying each other's company, and for me, it was realizing that when he didn't come for dinner, I really, really missed him."

On a table next to Ted is a photograph of Jack Kennedy in a rocking chair, and another of his mother, Rose, and in back of Vicki are photographs of Caroline Kennedy and Maria Shriver, both holding infants, and hanging from the wall are framed obituary cards, one for Jack, the other for Bobby.

Although Ted is still overweight, and although his hands shake, a condition some attribute to excessive drinking, he appears, after a decade of bachelorhood, to have settled happily into married life, bantering with Vicki, praising her politics and her personality, as well as her cooking, and integrating her smoothly into conversation.

She, in turn, praises him as a man who is both romantic and also a caring stepfather to her two children. Several times, she reaches for his hand, and he surrenders it willingly.

"I really had never thought of marrying again," he says. "It was not something I contemplated, for a variety of reasons, but then, this became so inevitable after Vicki and I started going out that I decided I didn't want to live the rest of my life without her, and as the relationship developed, it brought a new kind of serenity, stability and security that obviously has an impact on one's attitude and view of life. I think it makes you a better person, and so, it's a joyous, happy time."

Some have dismissed this as a marriage of expedience, entered into by Kennedy because he faces what may be a difficult political campaign and needed to soften his image as a roue.

"Well," Kennedy says, unhappy at the question, "first of all, Vicki and I know this is real, and secondly, our children and our family know it's real, and our friends know it's real, and people who see us together know it's real, and that's about as much as you care about."

When Ted is asked about political issues, his answers are bold, confident. Asked about personal matters, however, he sometimes stumbles, as he did when Roger Mudd asked why he wanted to become president, and no one can say whether it is the result of a sense of inadequacy to the burdens once shared among four Kennedy brothers, or perhaps subconscious guilt at having survived.

Asked, for example, why so much of the criticism against him is vitriolic, he says, "Well, people have always er, felt strongly about, er, you know, sort of, about me, but we've been fortunate to have people who have been very loyal supporters and we've had people who have er, er, been er er, ah, enemies. And, er, and, much of this is a result, although not completely, of, er, being on the sort of the cutting edge of, of issues, er, er, that are controversial, but nonetheless . . . "

Vicki, holding his hand, rescues him, and at first, she speaks to him directly.

"My sense is that those are people who don't know you. They're people who don't know us together, and I think it's gratifying that people who, when they do get to know Ted, all that falls away and they get to know the real person."

On two occasions, they decline to answer a question.

One involves the issue of annulments.

Although she has been granted one, according to a source, he has not, and Cardinal Law has been quoted as saying that in the eyes of the church, Ted is still married to Joan, his wife of 23 years, and not free to enter into another marriage.

"That is private," Vicki says of the annulment issue. "We'd rather not talk about it."

The second involves whether they'll have children.

"Another private issue," she says, politely. "I'm sure that doesn't come as a surprise to you."

For all their similarities as Democrats, their marriage is a merger of cultures, North and South, of gumbo vs. clam chowder.

Kennedy laughs.

"Well, Vicki is a good cook."

"You're a good sous chef," she says.

"Well, I do steaks and chicken and fish on the grill outside with tomatoes and marinade, but nothing beyond that. Sauces? I know what I like," he says, and then, again, self-deprecatingly, "and unfortunately, the more the better."

"Well," she says, refusing to join in conversation that diminishes him, "you're a good cleaner-upper, and no, I haven't mastered clam chowder, but I will. My mother is Lebanese, but she's an excellent clam-chowder person."

Although Ted approached Lebanese food with what Vicki calls fear and trepidation, in a stunning reversal, one of the most notorious bachelors of the '80s now concedes that in the '90s, he's learned to love, of all things, eggplant casserole.

"It's something I had never heard of before," he says.

As carbon-copy Democrats, they agree on most political issues, although they argue over one -- statehood for the District of Columbia, something he favors, she opposes.

"I'm not going to say whether he's convinced me," she says. "My mother told me always to keep a little mystery about me."

Having moved into his McLean, Va., home, she is about to put up for sale her two-story brick house in middle-class Woodley Park, Washington, and if other couples who marry for the second time struggle over their children, that does not seem to be an issue for Ted and Vicki, who is the mother of Curran, 9, and Caroline, 6.

"They adore Ted," she says.

He begins talking about them before he is asked.

"They're cute as buttons. In the evening, we read 'Call of the Wild,' a wonderful book. I read it with [his now adult son] Teddy. In the morning, I swim with Caroline. This is the little pool here, and that's the big pool," he says, pointing to the ocean. "When the tide's out, we go to the ocean, and we were doing handstands the other day, and, of course, every child has seen gymnastics, where they give points, and so we were going to grade each other. For my first handstand, she gave me a 6.5, which was overly generous. She did the next one, and I gave her 8.9, and then I did one and when I came up, you could look into her little eyes and see her lip was quivering, because she didn't know whether to give me a higher mark, or lower, or the same , and finally, she said, 'Well, you got 9.1, so you won.' It was the sweetest moment."

With Ted running next year for reelection, Vicki seems eager to campaign, and certainly not intimidated.

"Not at all. I enjoy politics. I know who I am and where I come from, and I feel passionately about issues Ted's involved in. I feel fortunate that he happens to be my husband, but long before I fell in love with him, I cared about issues he cares about, and so, we're fortunate to be so close in our beliefs. And Massachusetts? I love Massachusetts. I've been living in Washington, and Louisiana is my original home, but Massachusetts is my second state, always. My brothers went to school here, and I have cousins in Springfield.

"One thing that troubles me is the notion of roles. It seems to me we should move beyond categorizing people by this kind of role or that, and whether a woman works at home or outside is irrelevant. It's an attempt to distract us from real issues. A woman should do whatever's natural."

Lauding her politics, Ted leaves no question she'll play a role in his campaigns.

"It was interesting," he says. "At the time of the Republican Convention, we were on an island in Maine, and each evening, after dinner, we'd watch the convention together, and Vicki's comments were so provocative, and within three days, you saw columnists and the polls reflecting her assessments."

At the end, despite days of grueling interviews, they are courteous in acceding to a request that they be photographed out of doors, and so they head out across the great lawn where the Kennedys have played touch football for generations, and with wind blowing their hair, they stroll the boardwalk across the dune toward the ocean, holding hands and laughing together, their words lost in the sound of the surf.