
Candace L. Randle

Politics to public relations, Camden native's career hits a billboard with a bullet

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Special to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Gregory Blakey - Candace Randle.

WASHINGTON - Not familiar with Candace Randle? That's all right. She's still young.

Despite her age, the director for corporate communications and public affairs for The RLJ Cos. has already had an impressive career. It's one that saw Randle chosen as one of PRWeek's "40 Under 40: The New Trailblazers" last year, which is how her picture wound up on a billboard in Times Square. (True story: You can see the billboard on Randle's smartphone, along with up-close photos she has snapped of celebrities and major politicians.)

"I had no words," she says of seeing her smiling face on that billboard. "That happens once in a lifetime. Growing up in small-town Arkansas, you don't expect to end up on a billboard in Times Square."

The honor from PRWeek is a big one, even if the "40 Under 40" tag implies she's only slightly under 40. She's 35 - there's a lot more that she plans to

accomplish before she rolls into her next decade.

Already the Camden native has worked on a pair of presidential campaigns, as well as in the offices of an Arkansas governor, senator and congressman. For half a decade, Randle worked in Little Rock on projects that affected Arkansas with Entergy Services Inc.

"She's totally fearless," says Kay Kelley Arnold of Little Rock, a vice president of public affairs at Entergy. "We would throw a number of assignments her way, and she wouldn't stop until they all got done."

Since 2008, Randle has worked for The RLJ Cos., serving closely with billionaire media entrepreneur Robert Johnson, who is perhaps best known for founding Black Entertainment

Television. RLJ is a holding company with a diverse portfolio, giving Randle the opportunity to be involved in a broad array of activities.

A week in November began like this:

Monday she was at a Malaria No More event in New York where Hillary Clinton was honored. The event raised more than \$1 million to buy mosquito nets, rapid tests and malaria treatments.

Tuesday she was back in Washington, attending a fundraiser for U.S. Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark.

Wednesday, it was a dinner for Knock Out Abuse, which builds awareness of and combats domestic abuse. Musicians Eric Benet, Questlove and MC Hammer were all there, but for Randle, a self-described “political nerd,” the biggest thrill was seeing CNN’s Wolf Blitzer.

That’s just her working nightlife. During the day, she was doing impressive work at RLJ; at least impressive enough that her co-workers nominated her for that PRWeek honor.

“She is dedicated and works diligently with the [senior vice president]of corporate communications and public affairs to ensure that my vision and the strategies behind my business endeavors are communicated in an effective and efficient manner,” says Johnson, founder and chairman of The RLJ Cos.

“Candace has been instrumental,” he adds, “an asset.”

This from a man for whom asset valuation is a continual calculation.

Growing up in Camden, Randle never dreamed something as big as having her face on a billboard would happen to her. Nor did she dream of going into public relations. She simply aspired to be successful.

“I wanted to be a lawyer,” she says. “That was the definition of success coming from home - lawyer, doctor, policeman, teacher.”

Before lawyer, Randle wanted to be a fashion designer. While that didn’t happen either, she has still got a sharp eye for fashion. She’s 5-foot-2 flat-footed, but you’re unlikely to see her close to that height - “I always wear heels,” she insists - unless you catch her at the gym, for which she wakes up most mornings around 5.

“I skim through People at the gym,” she says with a laugh. “I’m a girl.” ‘SOFT SPOKEN ... TOP-NOTCH’

Randle’s parents divorced when she was young. She wasn’t lacking for playmates, though, as she had “like a million cousins,” owing to her mother being one of seven children.

She loved spending time on her grandparents’ farm as a kid, making any duck, cow or rabbit she laid eyes on her pet, and going out into their garden with her cousins to eat vegetables off the vine.

She has nothing but warm things to say about her hometown. She was a very good student - she jokes that she's "gotten over" the fact that she graduated just outside the top 10 percent of her class - and was constantly involved in activities, such as debate team from eighth grade on, a fine preparation for a then-aspiring lawyer. There were ballet and tap lessons as a little girl, then piano for over a decade.

There was playing clarinet in the school band and performing as part of the flag line, and competing in numerous pageants, often taking home the Miss Congeniality award.

Even at a young age, Randle displayed the work habits that she would carry into her professional career. Darren Peters of Washington, whom Randle was an assistant for at Entergy, says what always stood out was the thoroughness with which she approached every task, and the friendly manner in which she set out to make sure every last detail was completed.

It's this mindset that causes her to carry her smart phone with her for those early morning workouts, although she insists it's used mostly for music. (For the record, Randle has shed 30 pounds over the past year.)

"Candace was great," says Peters, today the director for Federal Government Affairs. "She was soft-spoken, but she was very meticulous about making sure she did everything all the way. She always reviewed her work to make sure what she turned in was top-notch."

It's a little hard to believe that Randle could be described as "soft-spoken." She's extremely warm with new people, excited to talk about the projects she's volunteering for, or the new restaurant she found, or to learn more about an interviewer or a server.

And yet, she's a slightly reserved person by nature, which is why, even though she loves politics, you're unlikely to ever see her run for office. If she's passionate about a candidate, she'll throw everything she's got into supporting that person. After earning her bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in 2000, Randle went to Tennessee to work on the presidential campaign of Al Gore.

She sat out the 2004 election cycle, then was back in the ring for 2008, working as a special assistant on the Hillary Clinton campaign. That's two presidential campaigns, two defeats. So Randle doesn't know if she'll get involved in another, but candidates, take note: She's someone you might want to persuade to be on your team. After all, she says working at the White House "would be a dream job," and she knows you don't get a gig like that without doing some serious hustle first.

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After the Gore campaign, she had a stint working in Little Rock for Congressman Vic Snyder. Following the Clinton campaign, which had taken her from Arkansas to Washington, she stayed to work for Pryor until she was brought on board at RLJ.

And then there was the year she worked in communications and media relations for Gov. Mike Beebe, 2006-07. A volunteer on the Beebe campaign, Randle had several responsibilities in the

governor's office, including briefing the governor and his staff on issues of state and national interest.

"People that she works for or with come to rely on her so much, because she's so good at what she does," Peters says. "You know you don't have to worry if she's done adequate research."

Randle's work in Beebe's office required her to start each morning by reading newspapers from all over the state - not a bad way to begin the day for an avid reader. Randle's love of the printed word goes back to her childhood. Her mother, godmother and a cousin were all educators, so they made sure she always had a book in her hands, or was at the Camden Public Library to find one.

All that reading has helped make her a gifted writer. She has written for The Art Scene, an online journal of art and cultural commentary. And she has edited PowerPlay magazine, the first in Arkansas to highlight the depth and diversity of black professionals in the community, business, philanthropy and politics, as well as its Washington-based counterpart of the same name.

"She's still the same girl from Camden, which is why I try to convince her of the need to come back [to Arkansas] from the big city," says Darrin Williams, CEO of Southern Bancorp and an erstwhile mentor. "She's lived in D.C. for a while, but she still maintains an Arkansas cell number, so I'm holding out hope."

Camden is a long way from Washington, but there's no denying the lessons learned there made a major imprint.

It was there that she learned the importance of getting involved in issues that matter. Her mom was county treasurer for a while, and Randle remembers well the excitement she felt when she went to the polling places every Election Day.

"I remember seeing the balloons, people handing out fliers - it was an event," she recalls. "We've always been involved politically. No one's ever run for office, [but] there was just a sense that this is what you do, and being of color, this is what we fought for."

Randle's interest in political science was strong enough that she majored in it at the UA. While at Entergy's government affairs department, she was involved in its political action committee. She earned her master's of public administration from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

"Sometimes there are people with great ideas who can't implement [them], but she has the ability to do both," says Entergy's Arnold. 'EVERYTHING'S IN THE SAME BUCKET'

Washington is a hodgepodge, the kind of place few people are from.

Randle has been in Washington since 2008. She loves it there and has no intention of leaving anytime soon, but she's got plenty of Arkansas left in her.

She's excited to run into someone from her home state, and she is always talking up Arkansans and Arkansas companies. She also recalls with laughter the time Johnson had her lead a group in calling the Hogs at a holiday dinner.

“Talk about representing the Arkansas Razorbacks!” the former Razorback Belle, who helped show athletic recruits around campus during visits, says. “Many of my colleagues had absolutely no idea what was happening. Some thought it was a team-building exercise, but everyone went along for the fun of it. We still laugh about it today.”

Randle holds Johnson, the country’s first black billionaire, in the highest regard, calling it “a great honor” to work with him.

Johnson’s portfolio includes 13 companies, and at times Randle is involved with all of them. If he has a speaking engagement, she and her team prepare his remarks. She puts out news releases related to his many business and charitable interests, and pitches story ideas to media entities all over the country. Her efforts have landed her boss recognition in The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Forbes and on CNN, CNBC and other major media outlets.

“What’s helped is to go with the flow,” she says. “Politics is my passion, art is my passion, and so is writing. So the position I have now, it’s like everything’s in the same bucket.”

Although her boss is connected to a veritable “who’s who” of influential politicians, entertainers and businessmen, not every moment is as action-packed as that week back in November.

Unless she’s planning an event, weekends are her down time, when she can sleep in and catch up on episodes of Scandal; or take photos of her adopted city; or read a book that’s career- or investment-focused; or try her hand at abstract painting.

She can use her free time to contribute to Malaria No More, or National Women in the Arts, or The Corcoran Gallery. She loves the arts, dating back to her involvement with the Arkansas Arts Center while a student, and would love to help create great works - if not herself, then by making it possible for others to do so.

“My ultimate goal is to someday be able to [be a fundraiser] for the arts, to give [artists] the additional funds to take care of whatever they need - supplies, a studio space with the right light,” she says.

“It’s really important for me to give back somewhere, because a lot of people have given back to me.”SELF PORTRAIT Candace Randle

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH: July 30, 1978, Camden **ONE THING PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED TO LEARN IS** as a child, I had a pet cow named Pinky. He was actually a bull. I love telling the “pet cow” story today because no one ever believes it! Later in life, I was crowned Miss Ouachita County, circa 1995-1996. (OK, so these are two things, but fun to know.)

WHEN I GO BACK TO CAMDEN, I like to visit with friends and my family and enjoy the time relaxing.

THE BEST ADVICE I EVER RECEIVED is to be myself, own my personal strengths, and shine at the things I do best.

MY GOAL FOR 2014: To become more actively involved in social philanthropy and the local arts community. I want to personally launch a program that exposes young people to art and artistic talent. I've painted as a hobby for several years now and believe exposure to creative expression develops one's talent that can be expressed across all art forms. In my role at RLJ, I work with one of the oldest intact collections of African-American artworks in the United States, the Barnett Aden Collection, which is privately owned by Robert L. Johnson. The creative talent among the collection's artists is absolutely magnificent and inspirational.

WHEN I'M EXERCISING, I LISTEN TO everyone from Jay-Z to Jimi Hendrix. I seem to have some of my most brilliant project ideas while working out!

I WOULD DESCRIBE MY STYLE THIS WAY: I love fashion! My style is modern classy ladylike with a few uniquely edgy pieces. Think Grace Kelly meets Diana Ross as Mahogany, meets Marilyn Monroe!

A BOOK I HIGHLY RECOMMEND: Susan Cain's Quiet and Mika Brzezinski's Knowing Your Value

IF I HAD AN EXTRA HOUR IN THE DAY, I would practice more yoga.

MY FAVORITE SPOT IN WASHINGTON IS the National Portrait Gallery.

WHAT I LEARNED WHILE WORKING IN THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE is, the cause is greater than yourself. I'm passionate about a number of issues, especially women's issues and projects that address gender and racial inequities, and working in Gov. Mike Beebe's administration gave me an opportunity to be involved in a number of issues and events that [affected] families and individuals across the state.

THE FIRST THING I READ IN A NEWSPAPER IS the business section for coverage of any of Mr. Johnson's business initiatives, such as the RLJ Rule, which tackles minority unemployment, and his campaign to reshape the payday lending industry.

A WORD TO SUM ME UP: Independent.

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