

Jan. 11, 1999

**Lura Lynn Ryan : ‘June Cleaver with Pearls”**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD — Nearly four decades ago, Lura Lynn Ryan was June Cleaver without the pearls.

With five children under the age of 3, the mother of six almost single-handedly cooked the meals, changed the diapers, read Dr. Seuss at bedtime and, every day, ran load after load of dirty laundry through two washers and two driers in the basement of her Kankakee home.

“I spent most of my life then in the laundry room, crying,” said Illinois’ incoming first lady, whose brood includes triplets.

Now the stresses of childrearing are gone. And if there are any tears, they might show up today as she proudly watches her husband, George, be sworn in as Illinois’ 39th governor.

For much of her life, Lura Lynn Ryan has chosen to stay out of the spotlight while her high-school sweetheart climbed his way up the political ladder. But that is about to change.

In this farmer’s daughter-turned grandmother of 13, the state will gain an important spokeswoman against alcohol and drug abuse and a champion of the arts, historic preservation and organ donations. “The first lady should really be a spokesperson for any organization that has a good purpose,” she said. “I think I can do that.”

Her children join close friends in saying there are no airs about Ryan, who loves a good steak, shops for clothes at Marshall Field’s and T.J. Maxx and melts when she hears Frank Sinatra’s signature song, “My Way.”

“She’s the type of person when you meet her, you feel like you’ve known for a long, long time. There is nothing artificial about her,” said Dee Pinsky, a close friend for 30 years.

The 64-year-old new first lady also acts as a sounding board for her husband, helping clear his head during difficult political times and sometimes helping him prepare speeches.

“She’s a big adviser to me,” the incoming Republican governor said. “She’ll play a big role. She’s been very active in every office I’ve held.”

The Ryans first met in an English class when they were freshmen at Kankakee High School in 1948. He lettered in football and basketball, and she helped organize dances and belonged to the drama club. They dated throughout high school.

“He seemed to think I was kind of cute, and I thought he was kind of handsome,” she said.

“It was kind of love at first sight, I guess,” he said.

Born July 5, 1934, the former Lura Lynn Lowe grew up on a farm near the small Kankakee County town of Aroma Park, where her father operated a farm seed company. After graduating, she thought about becoming a nurse, but decided against it. In 1956, she and George Ryan married. Within a year, their first child was born, a daughter named Nancy.

More children followed: In 1961 came Lynda; a year later triplets were born: Julie, Joanne and Jeanette. Finally, in 1964, the Ryans’ last child arrived, George Jr.

The burden of rearing the children fell mostly on Lura Lynn Ryan because her husband often spent 16-hour days running the family’s Kankakee pharmacy.

“She was June Cleaver, except for the pearls,” daughter Nancy Coghlan said. “I can remember her being exhausted all the time. Once in a while, Dad would recognize she had had it and take her on vacation.”

He would book a weekend at the old Water Tower Hotel or Sherman House in downtown Chicago and leave the kids with a close family friend.

“We’d check into the hotel,” Lura Lynn Ryan said. “I’d go to bed and sleep. He’d bring all the reading material and things he wanted to catch up on and do that while I was sleeping. George would order food to the room, wake me up. I’d eat it, then go back to sleep.”

In 1972, George Ryan was elected to the Illinois House and began spending more time away from home. When school let out for summer, Lura Lynn Ryan loaded up the kids and came to Springfield to join her husband for the final days of the session.

“A lot of wives never came to Springfield. Sometimes, I found those were the marriages that didn’t really hold up,” she said.

Lura Lynn Ryan adapted to the role of a political spouse, occasionally enjoying some rewards. In the early 1980s, when her husband was the top House Republican, she got to meet her idol, Frank Sinatra, at a DuPage County fund-raiser organized by then-Senate Minority Leader James “Pate” Philip (R-Wood Dale).

“We were introduced to Mr. Sinatra,” she said. “My husband said, “My wife thinks you’re the most wonderful man in the world. I have to leave now, but will you take care of her?’ He put his arm around me, and he was just very attentive to me all evening long. I was like a star-struck girl. I just thought he had a gorgeous voice and had such charisma.”

None of the couple’s children have followed their father into politics. Nancy is a Department of Professional Regulation employee; Lynda is a scheduling manager for the Empress Riverboat in Joliet; Julie is a cargo sales representative for United Airlines; Joanne is a homemaker; Jeanette is a receptionist for the Illinois State Medical Society, and George Jr. is an insurance agent and cigar shop owner.

Like Brenda Edgar and Jayne Thompson, Lura Lynn Ryan wants to be an active first lady. She plans to push drug prevention programs and seek a reversal in funding cuts for the Illinois Department of Alcohol and Substance Abuse.

She also wants to promote a proposed Abraham Lincoln presidential library in Springfield and has embarked on a $250,000 fund-raising effort with former Gov. James Thompson to buy the Illinois State Museum quilts made by Illinois’ Amish community in the late 1800s.

In her free time, she enjoys crafts and once in a while takes in a movie. “When I go, I like funny movies. I like to be entertained. I don’t like war movies. My husband likes war movies,” she said.

She hasn’t ruled out the possibility of a long-term stay in her new job because she said she believes that, if all goes well, her husband might get comfortable as governor, just as his two predecessors did.

“I would suppose it would depend on what he can accomplish within the next four years,” she said, when asked if she thinks her husband wants to be a two-term governor. “If he’s on a roll and really thinks he can make more of a difference, who can say?”