

wethechildren...

While many U.S. citizens cannot imagine reading the Constitution in its entirety, *Cathy Travis '82* has not only read it, but has actually translated the preamble, each article and amendment into modern-day terminology that an average fifth grader can understand in her book, *The Constitution Translated for Kids*. Travis took on this daunting task nearly 11 years ago after repeatedly hearing inaccurate references to the Constitution during the 1992 presidential election. “The ideas are simple, and they are great, and that’s what make us a great country,” Travis says, “More than anything, kids need to get context out of it. If you know what’s in it, then it’s easier to talk about it and share your ideas about it but, if you don’t know what’s in it, then you’re kind of stuck.” ▶





PHOTOGRAPH BY SAMI KITTNER

“When it is [the kid’s] turn to take charge, we should get out of the way but, they need to be educated about what it is they are taking charge of,” Travis says. “Leaders and educators today must try to make sure the future generations know what the nation is all about, what the rules are for keeping our liberties intact and how to keep the freedom of our society strong.”



In the United States, Travis makes the point that freedom does not necessarily mean the right to be anonymous in public places. People generally think of Americans as a nation of immigrants or a group in a geographical location with various racial backgrounds. But the Constitution of the United States defines who we are as Americans, as a country called the United States of America. It is our only common American birthright. “Most basically, it’s who we are and we are better people for that.”

A quote Travis uses frequently is, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” She explains that everyone’s view is different because of each individual’s perspective. For example, those who pay higher taxes will find the 16th Amendment regarding Congress’ authority to tax to be more unfair than citizens who pay fewer taxes.

“Disagreements do occur when interpreting the Constitution. It is important to know what the document says because in the end it will also hold us together. Understanding the basics of who we are as a nation, and as individual citizens, will help us keep it instrumental in our way of life and our privacy intact,” Travis comments.

Though the book is written primarily for school-age children, Travis says it piqued the interest of many adults. She has also written a supplemental workbook for teachers to use to engage students in discussion about the Constitution and its limitations.

Travis works on what is endearingly known as “The Hill,” and has now for nearly twenty years. She is currently the press secretary for Rep. Solomon Ortiz (D-Texas). With a major in journalism and minor in political science, she secured her first job as deputy press secretary for Rep. Bill Alexander (D-Ark.) right out of ASU.

Travis was able to spend time in the House of Representatives leadership office when Alexander served as Deputy Majority Whip.

She eventually made her way into the Office of the Doorkeeper of the House Chamber where she advised members of the House of Representatives on current and future activity on the floor.

As a result of being around the Chamber when the House was in session, she was able to listen to the politicians talk with reporters and hear speeches from the floor on a regular basis. “I could then compare that to what the news media actually reported and was able to judge it for accuracy,” Travis says. “It was an opportunity to learn the legislative machine up close and a chance to get to know many people in the House.”

Those early post-college years proved to be excellent preparation for her current role as a press secretary. “You can always make an experience more than it is,” she says. Through these connections in the House, she met Rep. Ortiz. At the time, he was looking for a press secretary. She applied and landed the job. “Love the

job. Love working for the people,” Travis says as she describes her role as press secretary and communications director. She is located in the congressman’s D.C. office in the Rayburn Building. “What I do includes speech writing, press releases, public statements, legislative work and I’m the intern coordinator.”

As the intern coordinator in Congressman Ortiz’s office, she has the ability to introduce young people to the task of running the government and how the national journey of the nation runs through the Constitution. Travis confesses she never wanted to be a politician. Writing about it seemed more appealing and her talent was geared more toward campaigning, preparing speeches and working with the press.

“The people who occupy this place are human,” she says of Washington D.C., “They make human mistakes and they’re going to dream human dreams. The Constitution keeps the focus real and the rules for American society fair.”

“That’s what I find generally happens. It is what the founders wanted this place to be, they wanted the ideas to bubble up and for the really good ones to receive the political support that was necessary from a broadest number of people, the majority. It has moved us ahead of the rest of the world because of so many different people with so many different ideas in one place with one structure to discuss them and reach agreement. That was their [the founders] whole idea, to have all of these different people come together and see what happens. It has worked brilliantly,” she says.



a28thamendment

In the 214-year history of the Constitution, only 27 amendments have been made to this document, the foundation of U.S. government. Several ideas exist on additional amendments, including one to repeal the Electoral College in the wake of the 2000 presidential election; and another requiring a balanced budget. While these are worthy of debate, Travis proposed another possible amendment in an editorial column, published this summer.

The devastating attacks on September 11, 2001, exposed that there is no provision for rebuilding the legislative branch of government if a catastrophic event occurs at the U.S. Capitol. Travis proposes that the 28th Amendment should focus on what action the government and people would take in order to restore the House of Representatives.

On September 11, United Airlines Flight 93 departed Newark Liberty International Airport, just outside New York City, 40 minutes behind schedule. Had the flight left on time, it would have arrived in Washington D.C. at approximately the same time as American Airlines Flight 77 hit the Pentagon. While conflicting views still exist, it is believed the hijackers’ target was the U.S. Capitol. If the situation had developed the way the hijackers intended, and the Capitol was hit,

News of Travis’ book hit the mainstream media mid-summer of 2003 when it was picked up by the Associated Press. Hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers throughout the U.S. carried the story and it was posted on about 45 news web sites, including the CNN and CBS sites. At one point, the book ranked in the top 20 books on Amazon.com. Despite the national media attention the book has drawn, Travis says she always likes for her Mom to enjoy all the attention as well, such as when Travis was interviewed on National Public Radio, which aired on KASU, Arkansas’ oldest non-commercial, educational radio station.

“Being here [in D.C.] has helped me realize that the quality of the education that you get is largely going to be the same no matter what university you come from. Ivy league is no better than ASU,” Travis says. “It’s about getting out there and doing it the best way you can.”

“The social experience in college is the first one away from home and those friends that I made have stayed with me and kept me grounded in terms of reality,” she admits. “When you spend all of your time in place where the tales are as tall as the corn in Nebraska, a dose of reality is a very welcome thing.”

“I can talk to those folks day or night and it would be no different than it was twenty years ago. It was an important part of my life and turned out to be a great part of the preparation needed for this kind of job.”

it is likely that several members of Congress would have been killed.

The 17th Amendment states that governors can appoint senators when the current senator cannot finish a term; however, the House has no stipulation regarding the replacement of members. Article I of the Constitution declares the House of Representatives to be the most democratic channel of government. Travis continues by outlining her proposal for the reconstruction of the House in dire circumstances. In her model, governors are empowered to call for new elections while simultaneously appointing temporary new members of the House following strict guidelines, as to not alter the partisan makeup of the House. The governor could make appointments only according to the party of the member lost. Also, the temporary members would be prohibited from running in the special-called election.

“Our openness is being taken advantage of by those wanting to see our destruction,” Travis says. “Homeland security is an attempt to protect us against the abuse of our open society while maintaining the freedom we all expect and are guaranteed in by the Constitution.”

Travis relates a quote from United Nations Secretary General Cofi Annan, “The world has entered the 21st century through pillars of fire,” when describing what Americans and the rest of the free world face in the next few years as the battle to keep it free goes on.