



*Ripples of Hope*  
**Kerry Kennedy**  
**Washington D.C., USA**

Summers were a time of exploration and discovery for Kerry Kennedy when she was a child. Her father, Robert F. Kennedy, would take time off from his active public life of political, civic, and civil rights advocacy, and take the family on trips around the United States.

Robert F. Kennedy was attorney general during the Civil Rights movement, so the concepts of equality and justice were very central to Kerry's experience growing up. In fact, they were of the utmost importance in her home. "I remember, for instance, that when I learned how to tie my shoes, if I put my left shoe on first, I was taught to be sure to tie my right shoe *first*; because it was important that things always be fair. I mean, where does a child pick up an idea like that? It's got to be from their parents. And it certainly was in my case."

On their summer trips across the U.S. they'd stop in wilderness areas to raft, camp, or hike, so she and her siblings could experience firsthand the many natural wonders that this great, expansive country had to offer – which she still advocates for to this day.

But for Kerry's father, there was always more than that. He was always campaigning at least part-time, even when they were on a family vacation. Ever an advocate for the most vulnerable, he brought Kerry to some of the poorest areas in the country, where people were suffering in incredibly difficult conditions, to show her how "the other half" lived.

When they were out west, they would often stop at remote Indian reservations and speak with members of the tribe about the problems and issues they were facing. When they were in the eastern part of the country, they'd campaign in similarly downtrodden locales like rural Appalachia, and her dad's approach was always the same: he always tried to find out what the people needed, and how he could help them. And always, Kerry was close by his side, and watching carefully.

When he ran for president in 1968, she was only 8 years old, but she helped in the campaign in any small way she could. "He was always full of laughs and fun, and we just loved being around him," she says. "But he also taught us to understand all of the hardships people face in our country." She remembers that above all, her father thought it was important that she understand what public service is about. "There are many Americas," she says. "And it's a truth that one can never be too young to begin trying to understand that."

After listening to searing testimony about conditions in Mississippi by Marian Wright – a 27-year-old Yale Law School graduate who was working with the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund in the state – to his Senate Subcommittee on Poverty in April 1967, Kennedy followed Wright through the heart of the Delta, a region in northwest Mississippi known for its entrenched racism and suffocating poverty. He was joined by fellow senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania.

As he often did, he had brought her siblings along to the meeting. Kerry remembers him commanding the room where she and all her brothers and sisters were seated. They were a rowdy bunch, but when her father began to speak, a rare quiet came over the room, as everyone listened to hear what he would say. He looked around the room, shook his head, and then he said, quietly, "I've just been to a part of this country where three families live in a room the size of this one, and I want you to do something to help these children."

For Kerry, everything about her dad was interesting, and inspiring. Because of his example, she grew up believing that public service was what you *wanted* to do, because that was what made life meaningful. It wasn't a feeling of obligation, or a feeling that was burdensome. It was more a sense of an honorable duty. "But that particular instance [at the meeting of the subcommittee on poverty] is the only time I remember him saying, "You *have* to be involved." She adds, "That moment, as much as any, set me up on my journey into advocacy - and particularly on a journey toward exposing the many abuses that go on around this world, in all of their forms."

Tragedy struck Kerry's family shortly thereafter, when in June 1968, after winning the California presidential primary, her father was assassinated. Though she was only 8 years old, Kerry knew that she would dedicate her life to carrying on the legacy of the noble ideals that her father had believed in so deeply. And she would act in accordance with her favorite quote by her father; it laid out a pathway for her own future work, and for the life she was going to lead.

*"Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."*

To carry on the work of a humanitarian and advocate as great as her father was wouldn't be easy. But Kerry always kept those words in mind. She remembered them, and believed that each small act of hers would "send forth a tiny ripple of hope" into the world, that would build toward a more just future.

When she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Kerry took her first public stand in service of an ideal. It was 1972, and Watergate was dominating the news cycle. For school, she had to write a biography of a famous person. "I chose Cesar Chavez. And my best friend said, 'Who's Cesar Chavez?' and I said, 'Well, how come you've never heard of him? He's as famous as Richard Nixon.' And she said, 'No, he's not. I've never heard of him.'" They argued about the merits of who was more famous and who deserved to be more famous - but the important thing for Kerry was her belief that Chavez should be a household name. Certainly in her home he had an enormous presence. Her family boycotted grapes and lettuce in solidarity with the farmers' struggle. So Kerry knew that Cesar Chavez had a story that needed to be told.

Some 16 years later, in 1988, her father's words echoed as true as if they had just been spoken; as Kerry took a small stand in support of an ideal, and that small act in support of Chavez' struggle led her on a course that brought her into contact with the great humanitarian himself. Chavez was embarking on his last great fast, and when doctors advised that he must end it or risk death, other leaders around the country picked it up and traveled with it. A network of human rights advocates and celebrities joined together to bring Chavez's uplifting message of solidarity forward, and Kerry took part in it too. "I had the honor of carrying the message forward from New York to Boston," she says. "It was a powerful thing to be a part of."

Over the more than 50 years since her father's tragic death, Kerry has lived up to being the fearless humanitarian and advocate for the disinherited that he inspired her to be in more ways than he could have possibly dreamed. What started in her kitchen one day, having an argument with her best friend, has blossomed into a life of service few can rival - both in the scope, and the breadth of the issues she has fought for.

"Human rights defenders teach us not how to be saints, but how to be fully human," she says. And in all of her work, this is precisely what Kerry has done. She has published a number of books, including *Speak Truth to Power*, which tells heroic tales of advocacy; and her writing has been featured in many newspapers. She has spoken out in favor of bail reform and other issues that stem from systemic racism. She has worked with Break Bread Not Families, to bring awareness to the current situation for refugees at the southern border of the United States, through fasting and prayer. And as the chair of Amnesty International's USA Leadership Council, she has fought in defense of people whose fundamental human rights are being abused and denied to people all over the world. To date, she has led more than 40 human rights delegations in the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Currently, she serves as president of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, a nonprofit organization that uses legal means to stand up for political prisoners, uphold the rule of law in volatile nations, and act as the voice of the voiceless. She also oversees the Ripple of Hope Award given in her father's honor.

When asked why her father is remembered in such high regard by political leaders around the world, Kerry says, “I think he made such an impact on people because he appealed to the best in everyone. He appealed to people who believed that we could actually make a difference; that each person could make a difference. And I think that that it is rare in American politics, and is really powerful. I think that’s really one of his great contributions.”

Like her father, Kerry appeals to the best in people—and urges them to exercise compassion, and to fight for justice and equality. For any of the countless people, places, and organizations she has advocated for in her uplifting journey, there’s no doubt she has faithfully carried on her father’s noble legacy—and then some.

*Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events.*

*It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped.*

**Robert F. Kennedy**

**Call to Action:** Learn more about Kerry’s work, and explore the extensive humanitarian network supporting equal rights for everyone around the world at Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights <https://rfkhumanrights.org/people/kerry-kennedy>

**Stone Soup Leadership Institute**  
[www.stonesoupleadership.org](http://www.stonesoupleadership.org)  
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