



Caperton parlays life into repeating successes

By Robert Morris
Staff Writer



Sen. Kent Caperton, D-Bryan

Photo by Tracy Staton

"It's a Wonderful Life Part II" would be the title, Dustin Hoffman would play the lead and most certainly the story would have some sugar-coated happy ending. Such would be the portrayal of Sen. Kent Caperton's Midas-sized life.

By any set of guidelines, Caperton, D-Bryan, is for all intents and purposes the very model of success.

The boyish looks and mild-mannered sense of humor belie the intensity and confidence that this respected attorney/influential senator/devoted family man possesses.

In fact, getting a handle on exactly what to make of Caperton is probably a difficult task for the man himself.

"Born and raised in the giant metropolitan area of Caldwell," Caperton was much influenced by his childhood environment.

His father, Judge W.A. Caperton, was a community leader from whom the younger Caperton gleaned a strong work ethic and an inclination for public service.

Caperton's own road to success had its beginnings on Highway 6. Upon entering Texas A&M in 1967,

his future became a series of goals waiting to be met.

While at A&M he was elected student body president, a position that gave him a working relationship with then President Jack Williams.

Following his graduation with a finance degree, this relationship led to a two-year student relations job under Williams, where Caperton was afforded the opportunity of seeing the "nuances of politics" first-hand.

Caperton then started law school at the University of Texas — an experience he termed "culture shock."

It was back to Bryan after law school, and Caperton immediately opened his own firm.

"I always envisioned that I would settle here at least for part of my life," he says. "I liked the community and I felt I had the opportunity to start a good law practice here and I did so."

It's Caperton's "I came, I saw, I conquered" attitude that makes his life seem like a prepared script waiting to be matter-of-factly acted out.

His first involvement in local government came in 1977 when he was named municipal judge. And although he was involved in several campaigns, such as Lloyd Bentsen's senatorial run against Phil Gramm in 1976, his personal political life was fairly limited.

However, Caperton felt the Texas Senate could use some help and he set out to get there.

So, in 1980, against the advice of friends, Caperton ran against long-time incumbent Bill Moore. He won the Senate seat, was eventually named best freshman legislator by Texas Monthly magazine and in his spare time — he got married.

Caperton's summation of his victory: "There were probably three or four of us who weren't surprised."

"I was not supposed to win that race. I ran against an incumbent who'd been in office longer than I'd been alive." Given Caperton's history, Sen. Moore might have had a better chance tackling a hurricane.

And even though Caperton says he probably would have run again if he had lost, the confident tone of his voice makes it clear that was never a consideration.

Caperton's accomplishments in the Senate are numerous. As one of the leading members of a successful push to reform Texas' open meetings law, he was effectively able to bring local government's policies into public view.

"I believe that government should be conducted in the open," he says. "I believe that we need to do things above board and prevail because we're right. I don't think Texas A&M should get funding simply because I'm a powerful senator."

"Instead, I think we should get funding because we have the best programs and because we are a flagship university. I believe that we can justify the funds we seek because we do the best."

Caperton was also instrumental in tort reforms passed by the last Legislature and spent much of the special session trying to preserve funding for higher education, a priority he lists high on his agenda.

"I intend to see that the commitment to public education and higher education is not compromised," he says.

Despite all his success in the Senate, Caperton isn't sure which direction his career will take following the completion of his current term.

"At the end of this term I will be 40 years old," he says. "I will have devoted 10 years of life to public service and I must confess that the option of being a full-time lawyer is not an unattractive one."

"At the same time there will be a large turnover in 1990 and I don't deny that the office of attorney general would be a great honor and challenge, as would serving as lieutenant governor of this state."

While Caperton makes veiled hints at his intentions, he vacillates on committing to any certain path.

"I've never had a grand scheme," he says. "I prefer to take it one day at a time."

One successful day at a time.

Catholic church responsible for much of Texas' heritage

DALLAS (AP) — Much of Texas' history and heritage is rooted in the Catholic church of Spain, and its influence continues today, centuries later.

The Roman Catholic Church was the first Christian denomination in Texas, and it was a Catholic who was the first European to visit what would become Texas four centuries later.

Today the Texas Catholic Conference estimates there are 3.5 million to 4 million Catholics in the state, most of them Hispanic.

In 1528, Cabeza de Vaca, a Spaniard, was shipwrecked on the Texas coast and lived among the Indians for several years before returning to Mexico. A decade later, Spanish conquistadors led by DeSoto and Coronado and accompanied by missionary

priests explored Central Texas and the Panhandle.

The missionaries built frontier churches around which the Indians would be gathered, converted and civilized.

The Rev. James Moore, a Catholic historian, says the Indians often ended up as little more than slaves. That prompted a papal edict condemning the harsh practices and giving the Indians equal status with Europeans as "creatures of God."

An uprising by the Pueblo Indians in northern New Mexico in the 1690s forced the Spanish to abandon their 80-year-old settlements around Santa Fe and fall back to El Paso, where they established several missions. The Ysleta mission there is generally recognized as the oldest continuously inhabited site in Texas, says Gilbert Cruz, a

mission historian.

Over the next century, numerous missions were established in South Texas, and they served as hubs of the villages and towns that grew up around them — like San Antonio, Victoria, Goliad and Refugio. And the people who lived there were almost all Catholic, Cruz says.

Anglo immigrants from the United States began arriving in large numbers during the 1820s, and they found one of the requirements for settling in Texas was to convert to the state religion — Catholicism.

Eight Catholics signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, and about 50 were among the defenders of the Alamo.

Although Texas was free of Mexican rule, its Catholics were part of the Diocese of Monterrey until 1839, when all of Texas

except El Paso was detached and declared a prefecture apostolic in the first step toward becoming a diocese, Moore says.

The Catholic heritage broadened with the influx of Czech, German, Polish and Belgian immigrants who arrived in the 1850s and 1860s, building many Catholic communities that endure today. Panna Maria, established in 1854 south of San Antonio, is built around the oldest Polish Catholic church in the United States.

In 1874, the diocese of San Antonio was formed as the second in Texas, and in 1891 the Diocese of Dallas was created. The 20th Century has seen 11 more Texas dioceses designated, four in the 1960s and three in the 1980s.

Twenty-eight Catholic hospitals in Texas now treat more than a million patients an-

nually. Texas Catholic schools enroll hundreds of thousands of students in kindergarten through college, second only to the state's public schools in numbers of students.

Formed in the early 1960s, the Texas Catholic Conference, a statewide organization of bishops, clergy and church workers, presents a unified church voice on a variety of internal, ecumenical and secular matters.

The conference has successfully lobbied state government on a variety of issues, including minimum wage, abortion and parochial school accreditation, said Callan Graham, its first director.

"I don't think any other state has done it quite to the extent we have," says Graham, a Junction lawyer and rancher who was a state representative and later a lobbyist.

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