

briefs • Neighbors voice numerous concerns about Lexus Project's potential impacts **Page 2**

briefs • FAC proposes radical demolition of Hawthorne campus **Page 3**

rudy cole • Why all the anger? **Page 6**

Beverly Hills Weekly

ALSO ON THE WEB
www.bhweekly.com

SERVING BEVERLY HILLS • BEVERLYWOOD • LOS ANGELES

Issue 637 • December 15 - December 21, 2011



Island Ambassador

U.S. Ambassador Nicole Avant discusses The Bahamas, Obama's campaign and Beverly High soccer

cover story • pages 8-9

coverstory

ISLAND AMBASSADOR

U.S. Ambassador Nicole Avant discusses The Bahamas, Obama's campaign and Beverly High soccer By Melanie Anderson

So, how does a woman from Beverly Hills end up as U.S. ambassador to The Bahamas?

I served as the finance co-chairwoman for the Barack Obama presidential campaign in Southern California. I had met [Obama] when he was a state senator and was running for U.S. senator. My family has been involved in politics forever. It's a music background, but my father [Clarence Avant] has always been very much involved politically. During the civil rights movement, after and moving forward, he has been advisor to many senators, presidents and governors. I was very fortunate to grow up in a house that was always filled with various types of politicians. There was never a dull moment for a good conversation because there were usually both sides of the table, which was even better. It really gave me a love for government and a respect for our country and the democracy that we have and how important it is for everyone to make their voices heard.

How did your father get started in politics?

He wanted to be at the table when they were making decisions that affected African Americans. [Making] sure that there was an authentic voice at the table was very important to him. I think that's why he got involved. I remember a fundraiser we did at the house—I was very young—it was for mayor of Los Angeles Tom Bradley. It was a big deal because he was the first black mayor of Los Angeles. Moving forward, Ted Kennedy was at the house a lot. He probably made the biggest impact on me and [so did] Senator [Paul] Wellstone. We had met him about a year before he was killed in a plane crash [in 2002]. He's the one that really got me thinking about politics again. Even though I was a businesswoman, he said, "You have to stay involved; young people have to have a voice." I feel very fortunate to have had so much access to so many wonderful thinkers and wonderful people who are committed.

[My father is] very bright and very talented. He's a very good strategist. He's built a reputation for himself that most politicians, whether they're governors, senators, congressmen or mayors, when they start campaigns there's always a phone call. It's great to see that people respect his opinion and they value his opinion. I grew up in that type of world where he said you can't expect your government to do everything. You can't complain about

things and not be involved, and not vote. [My parents] made it very clear regardless of what political party you're in, you vote for the best person.

Music celebrities were around and athletes, [but] the politicians for me were the most exciting because they were always coming from Washington or another state. It was always a different feel, and yet a lot of musicians that were always at the house were also politically involved. It was great to see the marriage between the entertainment world and the political world. It's been around for a long time.

Was your father also involved with the Obama campaign?

No. We were all supporting everyone. The difference was the Obama team gave me a position. My parents were very involved in Hillary Clinton's campaign. They've been family friends for about 20 years, but my father supported me while I was working for Obama. [Clinton] ended up being my boss as well at the State Department. I got very lucky to have two great bosses who I look up to very much.

You recently concluded two years of service as an ambassador. How did you divide your time between The Bahamas and Southern California?

I was [in The Bahamas] 90–95 percent of the time. [My husband] Ted [Sarandos] was

always on a plane with my stepchildren flying back and forth. I was there most of the time. You have to be. I know The Bahamas sounds like a vacation post, but The Bahamas is a very important posting because it's a law enforcement post. You're 53 miles away from the United States. It's not in the Caribbean [Sea]; The Bahamas is actually in the Atlantic Ocean.

It used to be The Bahamas [was] known for drug transit, but now after 9/11 anything can come through. It's trafficking of persons, trafficking of weapons, or drug trafficking. I was constantly busy working with law enforcement officials there, which was my favorite part of the job. I was working with DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration], Coast Guard, CBP [U.S. Customs and Border Protection] and ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. It was a terrific team. That really was the best part of the job. I fell in love with law enforcement; I fell in love with all these agents and really saw the work that they do to protect the homeland. I think people forget The Bahamas really does serve as the third border; it is our backdoor. We think of Mexico and Canada but we forget the other side. The Bahamas is a great partner to the U.S. in helping [to] keep us safe.

Describe a typical day as an ambassador.

It varies on the day. I [would] meet with a "country team" every week, usually every Tuesday, and that was getting all the agencies

and agency heads together that would inform me. We would [discuss] concerns, challenges, what was going on in their world and [we had] to make very heavy decisions with them on behalf of our government. Some days were filled with all policy. Some days were filled with policy, public diplomacy and law enforcement; [those were] the three things [on which] we focused.

The easiest way to describe the role of ambassador is I am the personal representative of the president of the United States. It's a heavy load, but some days I was working with the Bahamian government, making sure that we're on the same page as much as we can be. We're lucky because we have a great relationship with them. Anything that we might have had minor disagreements on they would fix very quickly. A lot of it was to Secretary Clinton's credit. She made sure her ambassadors were focusing on real American diplomacy, really being out there and connecting with the people of the countries.

I focused on women's empowerment. I focused on people with disabilities and making people aware they're still human beings and valuable. I [helped connect] American businesses with business owners in The Bahamas. Magic Johnson was great. He came down twice to do business seminars with me. What I wanted to do was bring the world I came from of entertainment, art and media, and your job as an ambassador is to bring the best of America to The Bahamas. If it was about education, I called on Geoffrey Canada, the star of *Waiting for Superman* and [president and CEO] of the Harlem Children's Zone. Energy companies [from California that] focused on sustainable energy would come to visit. It was really making connections between two countries that were beneficial to both countries.

Tell us about the Bahamian form of government.

It's a [parliamentary] system, but it's a democracy. It's run very similar to ours. They have parliament [but] it doesn't run much differently. Fortunately we focus on the same values and have the same common goals, but The Bahamas [have been] independent only since July 10, 1973, so they're still newly independent. It's still a commonwealth; the queen is the monarch.

When you were sworn in by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, you remarked, "Beyond geographic proximity, the United States and The Bahamas share a commitment to democratic ideals, the rule of law and strategic interests that span issues of regional security, economic and social progress, energy security and stewardship of the environment." Tell us about the relationship between the United States and The Bahamas.

I think that sums it up. The relationship is excellent. It has been excellent for a long time and we're fortunate to have such a strong partner in the western hemisphere that has the same democratic values and understands the importance of the rule of law. The Bahamians feel very, very close to Americans. It's a tourist destination. [Between 4 and] 5 million Americans visit the Bahamas every year. Americans are really the ones who [Bahamians] see the most.



Tony Sarandos, Sarah Sarandos, Nicole Avant, Ted Sarandos

Was it difficult adjusting to living there?

The biggest adjustment was living in that type of fishbowl world where you have bodyguards every day and the privacy is gone. I thought I could handle it much better than I did in the beginning. I got used to it, [but] it's amazing what you take for granted [like] taking a walk around town or getting in your car to go meet your friends for dinner. I [also] wasn't used to being "on" all the time. Regardless of how I felt, I had to remind myself all the time I'm representing Secretary Clinton, President Obama, and our government, and I can't really say sometimes what I really want to say or how I want to say it.

Do most ambassadors have a security detail?

It depends on the country. Because The Bahamas is such a heavy law enforcement post and I help agencies make sure they put the bad people away, there's more protection for that reason. It made sense to me [when] someone said the best way to hurt [the president] is to hurt his representative or make the representative's life miserable somehow. That's happened in the Foreign Service; it doesn't happen frequently but it has happened enough where we have to be very protective with our people. We're like that about anybody, whether it's an ambassador or anyone coming off of a cruise ship. My main job as an ambassador was to make sure American citizens while in The Bahamas were safe.

How does tourism drive the Bahamian economy?

I would say it is the No. 1 industry for the Bahamas. What I am seeing is a lot of American businessmen and women coming in and doing lots of different real estate deals. The beauty is they are also expanding into alternative energy. You have a country that is so close to us that has the ocean, the sun and the wind. I held two energy conferences while I was there and attended many as well. I think the Bahamians are now opening up to other attractions besides tourism. While they're expanding in tourism, which is great, they're also realizing they have a lot to offer.

There's cultural tourism. There was an underground railroad to The Bahamas from Florida. If [slaves] got to The Bahamas, they were able to buy their freedom and that's how [The Bahamas] ended up with more churches per capita than anywhere else in the world. All the slaves that came there to get their freedom came from the southern states and brought their church roots to The Bahamas. Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] wrote his Nobel Peace [Prize] speech in The Bahamas. He was there a week before he was assassinated. He would go there to get his mind clear and to escape all the ills he was dealing with in the States. It's a very interesting history The Bahamas has with the United States.

Are you involved with Obama's re-election campaign?

I hope to be [but] I don't know to what capacity yet. No matter how long of a term you serve as ambassador, you always still serve the president, so when he asks, you do. If that's what's going to happen then I am definitely open to it.

Tell us about your family's music publishing business.

My father has a music publishing business [Avant Garde and Interior Music Corp.] and he has record companies [including Sussex Records and Tabu Records]. He was also chairman of Motown Records. My parents moved here from New York in 1967, and they've been in the same house in Beverly Hills for 43 years.

You were vice president of Interior Music Publishing and Avant Garde Music Publishing for about 10 years. Tell us about that.

I love music publishing. My dad realized he should start his company a long time ago. We have a small catalogue but a very active catalogue. I always wanted to be a music supervisor when I was in the music business. I loved the idea of taking a song and seeing [how] that specific song changes a scene in a commercial or a TV show or a movie.

When people would say we'd like to license this song, it's amazing how protective you get, because you [would] negotiate, "It's worth this," or "I don't think it's good for this scene." A couple of times I had lessons learned. There were certain things I said yes to not knowing the videogame business well. One of our songs almost ended up in some insane videogame I wouldn't let my stepson play. I love that side of the business. I love all types of music and I have such respect for musicians and songwriters. I'm trying to work on a music documentary with my husband. That's the one thing I missed when I was in The Bahamas; I missed being creative.

Were you involved with music at Beverly High?

I was in drama; I loved my drama class. I loved everything at Beverly. My stepkids [Tony and Sarah Sarandos] are [at Beverly] now and they love it, but for me, I talk about it like it was college. I had the best time. I enjoyed all my teachers. I even liked my principal; Mr. [Sol] Levine was the best.

[Drama] was more of a hobby for me. I liked debating more, and I played soccer. My mom [Jacqueline Avant] always kept me active in sports growing up. I think I was one of the first girls in AYSO and [one of] the first girls on the [Little League] team. [Former Board of Education President] Steven [Fenton] and I laughed about it. He said, "We hated when you got to bat because no one wanted to strike you out because you were the only girl." My mom always put me in a position to be the first girl doing something. In The Bahamas, I was the first African American female to be appointed to The Bahamas, and the youngest ever to be appointed.

I was always interested in other cultures. As a senior [at Beverly], I did a Russian studies class and I took a trip to Russia [when it was still the Soviet Union in 1985] with a bunch of my classmates. It was a very different time, but the best time of my life. When I see Principal [Carter] Paysinger now, [I think], "I remember Coach Paysinger!" How fantastic!

I loved growing up in Beverly Hills. I [have] moved to a house [that's] not even a half a block away from my elementary school, Hawthorne. Every day I drive by or walk by, I have the fondest memories of elementary school and high school.

How are you involved with the Beverly Hills Athletic Alumni Association?

I had to disassociate myself when I became ambassador, but I [was] very involved and who could say no to Steven [Fenton's] passion? It was great because it was like a mini reunion every time we all went to a meeting. That again is a love for Beverly High. It's just such pride and it's such a great school. I know it's gone through a lot of changes; it still deserves all of our attention. Hopefully I can start back on my board.

Tell us about your husband Ted Sarandos' role as chief content officer at Netflix and your stepkids at Beverly.

I'm very lucky because when I started dating Ted and found out he had two pre-teens, I thought "Oh my God," but it was always warmth, kindness and goodness from the beginning. I'm really happy to be home with them permanently now. It's great to be back in Beverly Hills, too, because I've bounced around between New York and Manhattan Beach. When I met Teddy he was living in Beverly Hills already and when we got married, we wanted a bigger space. I wanted to make sure I stayed in Beverly Hills because I love it so much.

Our lives are very busy. [Ted] travels a lot, but he's extremely creative and focused and logical at the same time, which is very rare. We connect very easily on a creative level. We love talking about TV and film and that's how we connected when we met.

[When] I pick up my stepson [who is a freshman] from school—he's on the baseball team—all these memories come back from 20 years ago. It's nice to be with my family in one place as opposed to flying all over the place. [My stepdaughter is] a senior. She's a great artist and excellent photographer. We'll see where she ends up. It's an exciting time in this house. It feels good to have this other side of me to be able to nurture and guide, and direct and protect. I was doing that [in The Bahamas], but for different people and for different reasons. Being home, it's nice to be around family and realize the importance of being an anchor here.

What's next for you?

I miss philanthropic work. This is what lives in my spirit, working with other people and helping as many people as I can. I would love to get [back] on the boards of Best Buddies [International, a global volunteer organization], and the Bogart Pediatric [Research Program, which supports pediatric cancer research]. If I get back on the campaign, I'm thinking of focusing on art and media and bringing more of that [to the campaign]. I'll see where it goes but I do know the focus for me is to get back my creative and humanitarian sides, and to be able to do a lot of the things that I couldn't do for the past two years. It was a good tradeoff, but I miss it.

URSULA'S COSTUMES

- Adult Costume Rentals
- Children & Adult Costumes
- For Sale
- Masks, Hats, Wigs, Make-up
- Fog Machine Rentals



visit our website at www.ursulascostumes.com

2516 Wilshire Blvd. In Santa Monica
(Just West of 26th Street)
Sales: (310) 582-8230 Rentals: (310) 582-8231