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Cookie Mom

Gently baking up a political movement for 'sensibly'



Cookie Mom, aka rural Iowa actress Anne Claes, along with Cookie Kid, her daughter Catherine, is chasing presidential candidates around the state, pleading for a fraction of the money being spent on the Pentagon military efforts to be rerouted to social programs to help families.

Armed with a wicker basket of sugar cookies and a disarming smile, the most interesting person on the presidential campaign trail in Iowa this season may not be a candidate at all. It could be the mild-mannered lady in the blue apron, pearls, and jogging shoes. Cookie Mom has become a force.

With a recipe of perseverance, charm and boundless patience, Anne Claes travels the state, going wherever the candidates do, gently pushing the Cookie Mom message. "We are asking for just a smidgeon of the current Pentagon budget to be moved to different priorities," she explains in a voice emanating with unexpected force from within the petite frame - after carefully pausing to apply a fresh shellacking of hot pink lip gloss in the back of the room where Presidential hopeful Chris Dodd was working a small crowd in Storm Lake Saturday. "We are asking for just 15 percent - that's 60 billion dollars - to be put into social needs like education and health care and job training instead of more missiles."

Her cookies, nestled in blue gingham, are iced with a pie chart colorfully mocking-up the national budget. Half the cookie is frosted orange - starkly labeled "Pentagon." A dotted line carves out a piece of pie - er, cookie - to show how her organization, Iowans for Sensible Priorities, wants to re-route a fraction of the national treasury. As the crowd gnaws on a few billion bucks per sugery mouthful, Anne hopes they get the point, as well as the calories.

She hasn't always been Cookie Mom - or a political activist. Anne is a former small-town preschool teacher with a passion for acting. The Johnston woman was active in the Ankeny Community Theater when she heard that the Iowans for Sensible Priorities group was looking for someone with an acting background to portray Cookie Mom during the whirlwind campaign that puts Iowa briefly front and center in the American political consciousness. "They said they were looking for the All-American, wholesome mom," she laughs. "I said that I thought I could pull that off."

Indeed, she can - and is. On this day, she is accompanied, in fact, by Cookie Kid - her fifth grader daughter, Catherine. The younger Claes takes in the candidates' bluster with curious

attentiveness, and plays along good naturedly.

There are two Cookie Moms - after the Iowa character proved popular when it was first briefly tried as a lark during caucus season four years ago, a second actress was appointed in New Hampshire. Anne's eastern counterpart, however, is single in real life - making Catherine the only "Cookie Kid," says a proud mother.

Although Cookie Mom tends to bird-dog the candidates, the symbiotic relationship seems to be a rather friendly one. "I'd say that I like every one of them," Anne said of the presidential hopefuls. She artfully declines to pick a winner. "In my book, they are all pretty wonderful people." Pressed, she said she couldn't think of a single rude reaction she's gotten since she hit the campaign trail.

Her role is to gently pester them with questions of national priorities and defense spending, but before and after the speeches, she is just a fellow traveler. "After a while they started to recognize me and come up and say hello, and that's fun. If they don't see me, they are starting to ask where I am. When we talk, I like to ask them about how their families are doing - after all, I am the mom around here," she grins. This momma is armed with more than baked good, however. The group that sponsors her is an arm of Caucus4Priorities, the political action network founded by Ben Cohen, the Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream magnate. The message is not nearly as sweet as the cookies - "We spend more on the Pentagon than the rest of the world combined spends on defense." Even so, they stress, there aren't enough desks for half of the kids who qualify to be admitted to Head Start; schools are being forced to cut music, languages and PE programs; and federal spending on education has fallen to less than 10% of the proposed 2005 Pentagon outlays, they say. Sixty-one million Americans are without health care coverage during some period of any given year; many of these are children. Further, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that trust fund programs, including Social Security and Medicare, will be in deficit by \$1.2 trillion over the next 10 years and the entire federal budget deficit will total \$2.75 trillion, they claim.

The group also runs an upside-down school bus to dramatize the message that funds used for military could be spent on improving education; and a pink "pigmobile" to insist that the nation's pork-barrel spending priorities are mucked up. Mountains of Oreo cookies are hauled around, each used to represent a billion bucks of federal spending in dramatizations. If Cookie Mom is a living, breathing publicity stunt, a bit player on the stage of the state's political drama, she takes it in stride. Her cookies, though, she confides, are specially made for the purpose in Vermont. "I make a really mean chocolate chip, though - if they ever figure out how to paint on those, I'm their gal," she laughs.

After the election, she will hang up her pearls and her apron, and go back to being just regular mom, with a small "m." Well, perhaps not quite so regular. "I'm thinking about going back to college to get a new degree in education," she muses. "I love the theater, but what I've discovered is that I'm born to be a teacher." And for the record - that national budget? It's a bit dry.