Ana Unruh ’96

Science Turns Political

Imagine Ronald Reagan’s reaction reading the letter from Ana Unruh ’96—who was in first grade at the time—petitioning the Gipper to rescue the American Bald Eagle from its perch on the brink of extinction. Imagine is all we can do as no return address label stamped “1600 Pennsylvania Avenue” ever graced her mailbox. But Unruh, now a legislative assistant for U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-MASS), did urge the then-president to avian action and, in so doing, drafted her first major environmental policy statement.

Unruh’s bird-enthusiast father, Jerry, recruited his daughter into political activism at an early age. When compatriot Auduboners in her native Corpus Christi weren’t shadowing the double-crested cormorant through local estuaries, there was conservation work to be done—letters to editors to write, newsletters to send—and the young Unruh stuffed envelopes. She paid her dues early on a journey that has lead to a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Trinity summa cum laude, membership in Phi Beta Kappa, a Rhodes Scholarship—she’s the first winner from Trinity; the second from San Antonio—a National Science Foundation fellowship, and distinction as a geoscientist making startling discoveries about the Tibetan Plateau. All this just so she could work outside.

“It meant I could collect some samples from fun parts of the world,” Unruh says by telephone from her Capitol Hill home, where, when she’s not shoring up votes for legislative amendments on her Blackberry for her boss, this Oxford Ph.D. enjoys tuning in to see who’s trumping whom on TV’s “The Apprentice.”

As a grad student, Unruh traveled to Hungary and China to collect and analyze wind-blown dust, because as any Discovery Channel watcher knows, plate tectonics produced the Himalayas. It also changed the weather, creating Asian monsoons and Chinese deserts. Thus she posed the question: When did the thrust of India smacking into the southern coast of Asia push the Tibetan Plateau up so high that it diverted the course of the jet stream? (Unruh’s lead-isotope survey says 3.5 million years ago).

Having answered her doctoral thesis, Unruh traded in her inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer for life inside the Beltway, which seems nice enough. Actually it’s anything but “nice,” she says of the partisan nature of political work in Washington, D.C., but why not keep playing in the dirt for dollars?

“In the back of my mind, there was always this little voice: ‘When are you going to go out there and start helping people, Ana?’ Mostly I kept that in control by doing smaller volunteer projects in San Antonio.” With the Chemistry Club, she led hands-on experiments for local kids at the Children’s Museum. And when she wasn’t cooking up baking soda volcanoes, Unruh, a soccer star since age five, played midfielder for the Trinity Tigers until an injury sidelined her to intramurals; hence she became known as APO’s “IM goddess.” That was Unruh in the homecoming golfcart parade playing “Cow-chip,” Alpha Phi Omega’s bovine mascot. “Had I garnered a few more votes,” she laughs, “I would have been in the parade as homecoming queen and not dressed as a cow.”

Once when paying it forward, the Murchison Scholar with a gestalt embrace of Trinity life received something serendipitous—nearly prescient—in return. After performing intra-semester research with chemistry professor John Burke, around whom she and her summer colleagues had formed something of a “John Burke Society”—he knew the best places to eat lunch—and with whom they discussed isomers over peanuts, and drew little molecular models on paper napkins, she decided to serve as a peer tutor for a first year seminar led by political science professor Susan Siavoshi, tackling B.F. Skinner’s Walden Two.

Reading Skinner’s premise that politicians only guess at solutions then persuade people that they’re right, without ever proving anything, intrigued Unruh. It was a seminal moment. She insisted instead that it was possible to “make the science politically relevant.” And so after Oxford, she accepted a Science and Technology Fellowship to Congress from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In early October 2001, Rep. Markey tapped her to be an in-house expert on environmental and energy policy, and she has been on his staff ever since. Coincidentally, several other Trinity alumni serve in the halls of Congress, including Unruh’s own peer tutor, Julia Massimino, who works for Rep. Howard Berman.

When she’s not planning her August wedding to aerospace consultant Clark Cohen in Colorado Springs—“total geek love,” she says (they met through AAAS)—Unruh is locking horns with Republicans; something daily symposia with her Trinity friends prepared her to do.

“I probably was closer to the socialist end than some of my economics friends,” she grins, “but we had some pretty lively political and economic discussions in the Coates Center. Trinity is a small school, and so you get that a lot.”

—Mark Mattox