

Are 'Friends of Bill' friends of Hill?

◆ **Smart politics:** Maintaining close ties in early primary states is important.

By **HOLLY RAMER**
and **MIKE GLOVER**
The Associated Press

CONCORD — Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton didn't reveal whether she plans to run for President when she called Anita Freedman a few weeks ago.

"I didn't give her a chance," said Freedman, 79, who displays pictures of the Clintons all over her Portsmouth home. "As soon as she said, 'Hi, this is Hillary Clinton,' I said, 'Oh, great! Tell me what we need to do.'"

Six years after leaving office, President Clinton still has plenty of friends in New Hampshire and Iowa, the states that traditionally launch the Presidential nominating process.

And, many of the folks known as "Friends of Bill" count themselves as "Friends of Hill," as well. Some, like Freedman, a Democratic national committeewoman regarded by many as one of the matriarchs of the New Hampshire party, are eager to rekindle the flame.

Others, though, remain undecided on the 2008 race or have gravitated toward other candidates. It remains to be seen how much of her husband's network of supporters Mrs. Clinton, now a New York senator, can resurrect or what role they would play if she decides to get into the race, as expected.

Over the years since then-Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton dubbed himself "the comeback kid" for surviving a personal scandal to finish second in the 1992 New Hampshire primary, the Clintons have not forgotten local Democratic activists who helped them at that critical juncture.

Time and again they have reached out to those same activists and others in early voting states, inviting them to White House events, appointing them to administration posts, and generally remembering them on holidays, birthdays and at important moments in their lives.

When Freedman's husband was dying in 1995, a White House staffer called almost daily to check on him and President Clinton phoned the hospital.

And, when her daughter died two years ago, both Bill and Hillary Clinton called Freedman.

"They have been very nice to me," Freedman said. "I worked very hard for him, I liked every-



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Then Democratic Presidential hopeful Bill Clinton hugs his wife Hillary at Clinton's election night party at the Merrimack Inn in Merrimack in this Feb. 18, 1992, photo. While not all the activists who labored for Bill Clinton will return for another Clinton campaign — namely, Hillary's — many remain friendly and helpful.

thing he stood for, and still do."

Surviving the close-quarters combat of a Presidential campaign in early voting states like Iowa and New Hampshire, where one-on-one retail politics is the game, undoubtedly forges personal bonds. But maintaining and strengthening those bonds is also smart politics, and both Clintons are superb players.

Though Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin's bid for the 1992 nomination gave Bill Clinton and other Democrats an excuse to skip past the state, he later spent considerable time there as President and went well out of his way to build ties with key players.

Joe O'Hern, for example, was a veteran Democratic staffer comfortably ensconced as the Iowa Legislature's House clerk until Republicans seized control of the chamber in 1994, tossing him out of work. He landed on his feet as the Clinton administration's regional administrator for the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Kansas City.

"There are a lot of people in this state who have very fond memories of the Clinton Presidency," said O'Hern, who now heads the Iowa Partnership Of-

ice for Fannie Mae. "When you have an eight-year term of a Democratic President the number of people who touch that activity is quite large."

There's little doubt that aura extends to Hillary Clinton, O'Hern said.

Bonnie Campbell is a former Iowa attorney general who was named to run the Violence Against Women office in the Department of Justice after losing a bid for governor in 1994, a post that allowed her to travel often with Hillary Clinton.

"I got a chance to watch her operate on both a national and international level," said Campbell. "She's pretty dazzling."

While nostalgia and personal ties may play to Sen. Clinton's advantage, Democrats stress that it's the quality of the candidate herself that's earned their support.

Nancy Richards-Stower, a New Hampshire attorney, said she'll work just as hard for Sen. Clinton as she did for Clinton's husband.

Richards-Stower recalled her first meeting with Mrs. Clinton at a restaurant where her husband was making his first campaign appearance in New Hampshire.

As they climbed a staircase, Mrs. Clinton mentioned how eager she was to campaign for her husband.

"Mrs. Clinton, forgive me, but you've not done a New Hampshire campaign before," Richards-Stower told her. "The people you need to get aboard the campaign are going to want to spend time with your husband, not you."

Clinton responded by pinching a sizable section of her own hand.

"Nancy, my skin is this thick," she said. "If you think that I shouldn't do an event, I'd like you to tell me."

"Of course, the very first event she did was a sellout crowd," Richards-Stower said, laughing at how much she underestimated the wife who would like to become the nation's first female President.

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Des Moines lawyer Jerry Crawford, for example, who headed both Bill Clinton's campaigns in Iowa, is backing Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack this time, though he's spoken with Sen. Clinton's advisers to offer his thoughts.

"I have nothing but respect and admiration for Sen. Clinton and she is going to be a force in the Iowa caucuses," said Crawford. "It's a pretty interesting dynamic. You can go whole cycles without seeing a couple where both halves enjoy their own base."

New Hampshire Democratic Party Chairwoman Kathy Sullivan points out that her state has changed considerably since the Clintons first campaigned there.

The current top five Democrats in the state — governor, two members of Congress, the state Senate president and House speaker — were not politically active in 1992, Sullivan said.

"If I'm a Presidential candidate, those are the five people I'd want to be talking to," she said. "So I think you can't rely on the old friendships, especially because among those old friends, a number of them have become removed over the years from politics."

Former Keene mayor Pat Russell now serves on the state Liquor Commission. Though she had the same first impression of both Clintons — bright, sophisticated and moving in the right direction — she hasn't made up her mind about 2008. And she worries about re-igniting the ethics and personal turbulence of the later years of the Clinton administration.

"From my gut, I just don't know," she said. "I don't want all that stuff to be brought up against her. I'm just afraid the press is going to nail her. I know that sounds like a mother, but I am a mother."