

Kim Gray sits on Richmond's School Board and is moving to City Council, but in Denmark she's a celebrity

By LOUIS LLOVIO Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Thursday, December 8, 2016 11:45 am

Kim Gray got a bit of upsetting news from one of her daughters on election night in 2008.

The girl alerted her mother — a candidate for a seat on Richmond's School Board at the time — that two men were taking her campaign signs from outside a polling place at Carver Elementary and putting them in the trunk of their car.

Gray wasn't about to stand for that.

Politicians will tell you that campaign signs are a critical part of running for office. They get your name out when you can't be out knocking on doors and help establish you with potential voters. They're so important that stealing or vandalizing campaign signs has landed people in jail.

Plus, they're expensive.

Politicians, needless to say, are protective of their signs.

So when Gray heard that someone was taking her signs, she went to confront the two men.

That run-in turned into an eight-year odyssey of sorts for Gray that's expanded her reach from the 2nd District seat she represented on the School Board for two terms to Scandinavia where she's become a political pundit on television in Denmark.

It turns out that the two men stealing her signs were journalists for Danish television network TV 2 and were in the U.S. working on a story about then-candidate Barack Obama's first run for the White House.

One of the two, she later learned, was Rasmus Tantholdt, an international correspondent who now is the network's Syrian bureau chief stationed in Damascus.

When the journalists realized the woman named on the signs was the same person confronting them, they asked her to go on camera.

"They just liked the fact that I used the symbol from the Obama campaign and tweaked it a little bit," Gray said. "They were taking it to show how people were attaching their own fate to the Obama campaign."



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Danish journalist Ulla Terkelsen twirls the hair of Mya Gray, 9, as her brother Tyler, 8, waits while cameraman Karsten Sondergaard prepares to shoot. Kim Gray is in the middle. A Danish film crew follows Richmond School Board member Kim Gray, daughter Mya Gray, 9, and son Tyler Gray, 8, as Gray takes Mya to ballet lessons.

The interview took place in front of the Carver precinct, and Gray said they asked for her prediction on that night's election.

She remembers saying that "Virginia delivered the first African-American governor and Virginia will deliver the first African-American president."

The journalists ended up following Gray around the rest of the night, going with her to all the parties Democrats were holding in the area and were with her when she found out she won.

They finished the night at the Hat Factory in Shockoe Slip where state party officials watched the results coming in.

CNN called Virginia for Obama and not too long after that called the election for Obama. "My prediction was profoundly correct," Gray said.

The journalists came back the next day and filmed Gray as she went about her business.

"They kind of made my campaign the microcosm of what was happening in the country and the fact that I won a predominantly white district for a much, much lower office," she said. "But I was down ballot from Obama, and I come from a biracial background. They wanted to highlight that."

Gray was told later that viewers in Denmark liked her and her appearance generated a lot of feedback. They saw her as a representation of the changes coming to America.

While Gray, who's never been to Denmark, didn't get to see the response firsthand, four years later, Danish TV producers called her back.

She and Obama were running for re-election, and they wanted to get her thoughts again.

This time Gray wouldn't have to challenge guys outside a polling place to wind up on TV. Producers sent a limousine to drive her to Washington, where they interviewed her about the 2012 election on the White House lawn.

That time she told the Danish audience that Ohio would play a more pivotal role, which it did.

"I had actually been paying attention," she said.

Gray got the call again in early October.

Producers for a series on TV2 called "The Correspondents" reached out via email to see if she'd participate because "we — and our viewers — are curious about how you see things, here on the verge of a new political era."

The program, Gray was told in the email, is similar to CBS's "60 Minutes" and the special edition would focus on the U.S., with three of the network's foreign correspondents anchoring it.

She was going to be interviewed by Ulla Terkelsen, a Paris-based journalist described by producers in the email as "the grand old lady of Danish television."

“We chose Ms. Gray because she was in a piece that we did the night Obama was elected in 2008. So it’s a ‘going-back-to-see-what-happened’ story,” said Kristian Frederiksen of TV2.

Terkelsen spent a day with Gray in mid-October, following her around and discussing the election, which Donald Trump eventually won.

Gray said they talked to her about the rapidly changing political landscape and how Richmond is a good indicator of what’s happening across the country.

This election, Gray told Terkelsen, the enthusiasm wasn’t as high among the electorate and that although she believed Hillary Clinton would win, there wasn’t the same passion or momentum for the candidates as before.

Clinton wound up losing shortly after the interview, but Gray won her race for Richmond’s City Council and is leaving the School Board after eight years.

As for her time as an American pundit on Denmark television, Gray is not sure if producers will call again. But she likes the idea that her appearances, according to the people she’s spoken with, have made her a minor celebrity in the country.

“If my election didn’t go as well as it did, I was planning just to move to Denmark,” she said jokingly. “That was my Plan B.”