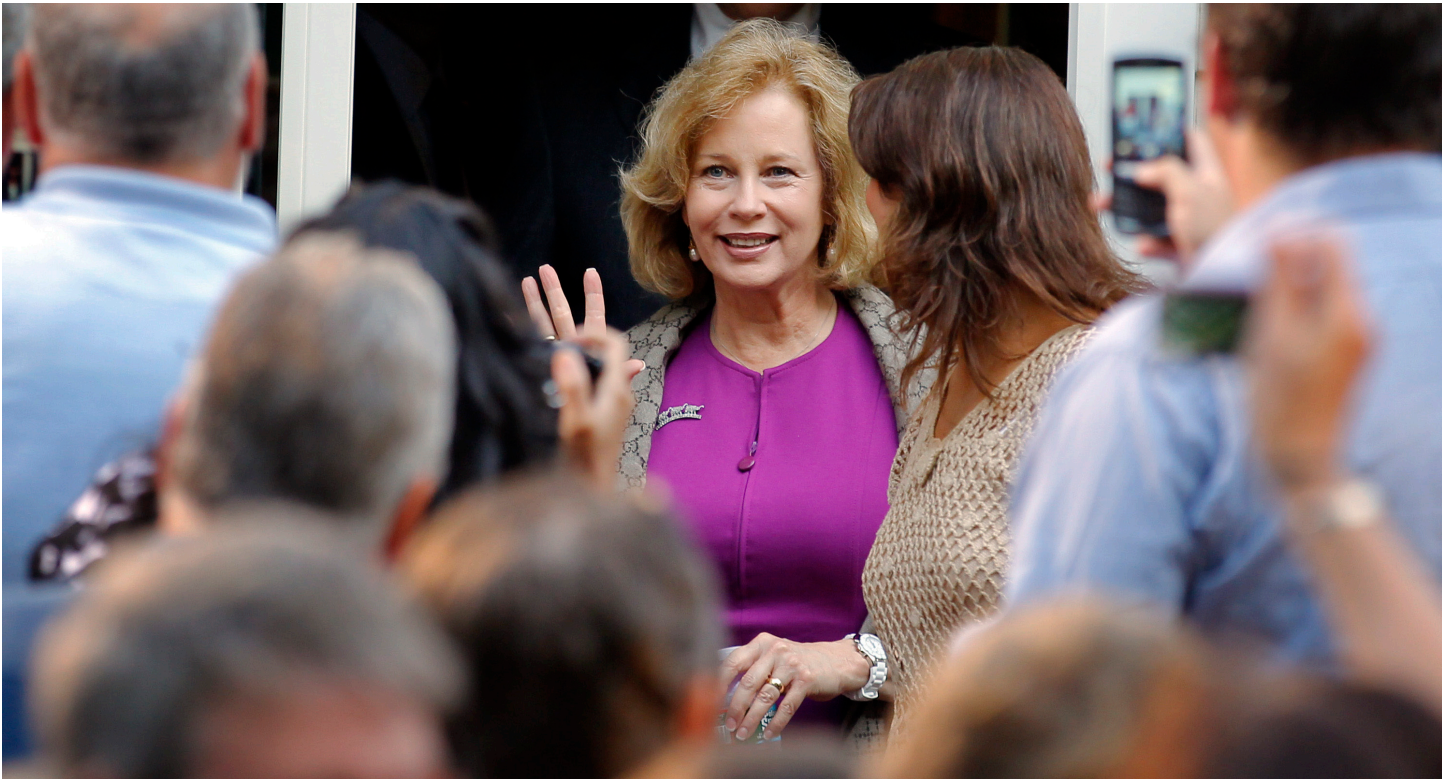


# FROM SMALL-TOWN NURSE TO TEXAS POWER PLAYER

As Texas First Lady, Anita Perry has made herself into a political force and a formidable asset to her husband's bid to become president.



**TEXAS FIRST LADY:** Anita Perry on the campaign trail with her husband in Greenland, New Hampshire. **REUTERS/BRIAN SNYDER**

**BY CORRIE MACLAGGAN,  
PETER HENDERSON AND  
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AUSTIN, TEXAS, OCT. 17

**I**NSIDE THE TEXAS GOVERNOR'S big, black SUV rides a small-town girl who never expected to be first lady of the state. Anita Perry, the wife of Republican presidential hopeful Rick Perry, is still a nurse at heart, reaching out to friends and strangers with warmth and health advice. But the quiet blonde who first dated Perry in high school has blossomed over the years into a formidable partner in his political career.

The governor credits her with pushing him into the race for president, and now Anita

Perry's campaign stops in crucial primary states are starting to make headlines. Just recently she described to a South Carolina audience how God spoke to her about persuading her husband to run. Both Perrys are evangelical Christians who have made their faith a centerpiece of the governor's bid for the White House.

During two decades in Austin, the Texas capital, Anita Perry has taken advantage of the opportunities presented by her husband's political rise, traveling worldwide to promote the state and enjoying access to Texas' movers and shakers. The first Texas First Lady in memory to take a paying job, Mrs. Perry left nursing and, in Austin, took a series of positions intertwined with the policy and politics of state government.

Three Anita Perry employers have lobbied or done business with the state government. One is the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA), which supports abortion rights, although both Perrys oppose abortion. TAASA also promoted a controversial "pole tax" on strip club patrons. Her fundraising efforts have garnered a substantial number of contributions from her husband's conservative supporters for the group.

**ANOTHER GROUP,** The Texas Medical Association, rebuffed then-state representative Rick Perry's request to give Anita a job, concerned about possible conflicts of interest. And as first lady, Anita Perry has taken more than a dozen trips

abroad to promote the state, all paid for by private groups, sometimes enjoying the use of a wealthy Texan's private jet.

And yet despite her years of involvement in politics, Anita Perry is still defined by being a nurse. She brought enough skill to her first career to become director of nursing at a hospital in her hometown of Haskell, Texas, and to this day she is known by many for her empathy.

Annette Burrhus-Clay, the director of the TAASA, remembers Perry coming into her office and making a beeline for the couch, where Burrhus-Clay's middle-school-aged daughter lay sick with a fever.

"Anita immediately starts feeling her head, rubbing her shoulders," Burrhus-Clay said. "She's making comments like, 'The good news is, you get to miss school today.'"

Burrhus-Clay says she is also in awe of Perry's Rolodex and her easy access to influential people such as Mica Mosbacher. The Houston philanthropist was so affected by her first meeting with Perry seven years ago that she let out a secret she had held for three decades -- her own sexual assault at age 19. "I felt so comforted and encouraged by the first lady, I felt inspired to tell my story," Mosbacher said. "I thought she had a very special healing touch."

AFTER THAT VISIT FROM Anita Perry in 2004, she began to donate to TAASA. She and her late husband, Robert Mosbacher, a former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, also became major contributors to Rick Perry's political campaigns after she met Anita Perry. She was appointed by the governor to the University of Houston System board of regents and served as chairwoman of Rick

Perry's 2007 inaugural committee while continuing to help TAASA.

"I thought, 'Here is somebody who has tackled sort of an unpleasant task. It's not a glamorous charity -- it's one of the tougher ones.' I readily agreed to help." A number of other Rick Perry donors and appointees have given money to TAASA as well.

Anita Perry declined to comment for this article. In a rare television interview in 2005, about halfway through her current tenure as Texas first lady, she described herself as "very normal," and talked about shopping for her own groceries while living in the governor's mansion. She also recalled her childhood in Haskell, about a three-hour drive from Dallas-Fort Worth.

IT WAS A SMALL TOWN of less than 15,000 where, "If I rode my bicycle someplace I wasn't supposed to ride, my mother knew before I got home." Her father was a doctor, and both parents instilled in her the principles of community service she has tried to follow, even in the fishbowl environment of the governor's mansion.

Anita went on her first date with football player Rick Perry when she was 14 and he was 16. Though she said she always knew he was the one, it was about 16 years before they were married, after she had gone to college and become a nurse. Even when Perry successfully ran for a seat in the state legislature, she did not envision a life in politics.

"I never thought he'd be governor. Yes, I have to admit that," she said in the TV interview. "To be honest, I never thought he'd be agriculture commissioner."

But Perry, after switching from Democrat

to Republican, did win a race for agriculture commissioner in 1990, then, after two terms, ran successfully for lieutenant governor in 1998. When the family moved to Austin in 1991, Anita Perry left nursing to stay home with her two young children for a few years, then set out to make a new career.

"He had friends. He had a job to go to every day. He had receptions. He had events," she told the Dallas Morning News last year. "I moved to a neighborhood where I didn't know anyone, coming from a place where I'd known everyone and going to a job I loved every day -- nursing."

EVEN BEFORE THE FAMILY resettled in Austin, Rick Perry approached a political contact on his wife's behalf. Former Texas Medical Association lobbyist Kim Ross says that when the future governor was still a state representative, Perry sought a job at the medical lobby for Anita. Ross says he turned down the request.

"One of my earliest conflicts with Rick was a result of my inability to find a job at TMA for Anita at his emphatic request when he was a Texas House Democrat. Nothing against her, but we just didn't have the budget or the slot for what are fairly specialized skill sets," Ross said. He also didn't want to put Perry, who he said had a "pro-medicine" track record, in a position of having to disqualifying himself on key votes. "I was uncomfortable with what would have appeared to be a purely political hire," Ross said.

Ross says that incident was the first in a succession of run-ins with the governor that eventually cost him his own job with the TMA. The organization declined to comment on the circumstances of his departure in 2002.

Allison Castle, a spokeswoman for the Perrys, told Reuters she had no recollection of such a job request and doubted that it had occurred. She also noted that "the governor has nothing to do with staffing at the TMA."

In 1994, while her husband was agriculture commissioner, Anita Perry took a job with Bill Miller, who has since become one of Texas's most powerful lobbyists. His firm at the time, MEM Hubble Communications Inc., was focused on public relations. Miller described her as a warm person who spoke her mind but did not take part in policy discussions. "She'd just execute. There was no drama," he said.

IN 1997 ANITA PERRY began working for Ray Perryman, a well-known economist who has consulted with state government



**SUPPORTING ROLE:** A nurse at heart, Anita is seen as a natural fundraiser. **REUTERS/BRIAN SNYDER**



for decades, both on contract and pro bono. Perryman employed her until Rick Perry stepped into the governor's job left vacant by George W. Bush's ascension to the White House in 2000.

Perryman said Anita Perry organized conferences, and he did not recall any policy discussions with her over the years. "She asked me for a job, and I thought she'd be great, so I hired her. Everybody in the office loved her and still does," he said.

Along the way, Anita Perry demonstrated an ability to raise money. The annual Texas Conference for Women, which she hosts, has many corporate sponsors. She also spearheaded fundraising to restore the governor's mansion after an arson attack.

"She would talk about the passion, and I would talk about the specifics," said former U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein Pamela Willeford, who worked closely with Anita Perry on the mansion drive.

IN 2003 ANITA PERRY was hired to use her fundraising skill at Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, where, in a single year, she tripled donations to \$124,523. Perry pulled in 35 major donors who gave a total of \$613,500 over the years. Most of TAASA's work is directed at raising public awareness about sexual assaults. But it became best known for its effort to promote a so-called "pole tax" on strip-club patrons, after the pole dancing common in such establishments.

In 2007 TAASA successfully revived a languishing proposal to impose a \$5-per-customer fee on strip clubs, with the revenue earmarked for sexual-assault prevention programs and health insurance for low-income Texas residents. The fee was challenged in court, but so far has been sustained. The state has already collected more than \$15 million under the law, but no funds have been distributed because of the ongoing court battle.

TAASA insists that Anita Perry had no role in this or any other legislative initiative. "She does fundraising. I have never been in any meeting on a policy issue – strip club or otherwise – with Mrs. Perry," said association lobbyist Lawrence Collins. Others in the state capital echoed that view.

"Mrs. Perry is proud of her efforts on behalf of sexual assault survivors, helping to raise money to assist sexual assault survivors and raise awareness about the travesties of sexual violence," the governor's office said in a statement. "In her capacity with TAASA she draws on her experience as a nurse to

patients who were sexual assault survivors."

The governor's office also confirmed that both Anita and Rick Perry oppose abortion, while TAASA officially supports a woman's right to choose an abortion.

"I THINK IT'S POSSIBLE for a group and an individual to work together for a particular cause and not see eye to eye on every particular aspect," said TAASA deputy director Torie Camp. "I am not aware of the first lady's views on abortion. I have not asked her about them. It's never been a conflict when we work with her."

TAASA's tax filings include information on 35 donors who gave more than \$5,000, all of whom started giving after Anita Perry joined the staff. Twenty-two of those have donated to Rick Perry's gubernatorial campaign as well.

The filings show that in 2004, among the 10 listed donors, \$10,000 was donated by Contran Corporation, whose chief executive, Harold Simmons, is among Perry's biggest contributors. Peter Holt, CEO of Holt Industries and owner of the San Antonio Spurs, who has donated \$537,740 to Rick Perry's campaigns since 2002, also gave \$7,500 to TAASA in 2005 and another \$10,000 in 2009.

The biggest individual donor – and perhaps the most colorful – was Republican politician Clayton Williams, who gave \$100,000 to TAASA in 2008. Williams infamously quipped during his own campaign for governor in 1990 that rape was like the weather: "If it's inevitable, just relax and enjoy it."

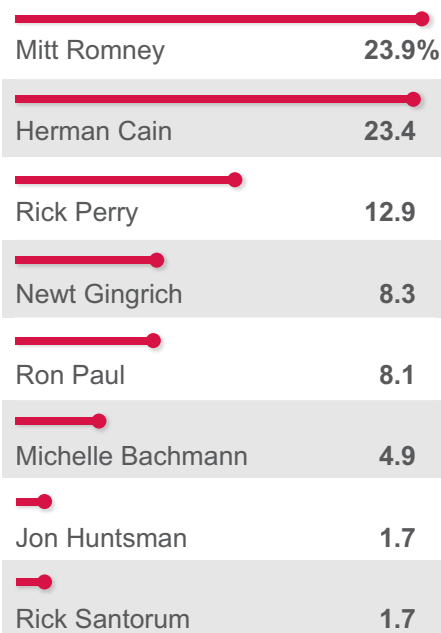
TAASA DIRECTOR BURRHUS-CLAY said that she was happy to accept his money, because "he has apologized for that." Williams did not respond to a request for comment on his donation.

James Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin, said that it is perfectly understandable that Perry's work with TAASA has been scrutinized, but that he doesn't see any ethical conflict there.

"If you are the spouse of an elected official and you want to get involved in something, you're between a rock and a hard place," Henson said. "The assets that you bring to the table wind up subjecting you to this kind of scrutiny."

Certainly it was important to Burrhus-Clay, in hiring Perry, that she was a well-connected Republican, because TAASA's issues are more often associated with liberal Democrats.

### Most recent average of GOP presidential campaign polls:



Source: [www.realclearpolitics.com](http://www.realclearpolitics.com)

"This is a largely Republican state, and I wanted someone who had her credibility in the community, and her professional credibility," Burrhus-Clay said.

ANITA PERRY HAS TAKEN frequent trips around the world, including visits to Japan, Germany, England, France, Italy and Canada. At the invitation of private groups eager to promote the state's business environment, since 2004 she has also represented Texas in Italy, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Malta, Czech Republic, France, Sweden, Spain, Israel, Slovakia, England, Brazil and Argentina.

"Texas is one of the largest economies in the nation and the world, and it's important that the governor and first lady promote Texas as the best place for business and tourism both nationally and internationally," said Perry spokeswoman Castle.

Anita Perry has said that her public role did not come naturally. "I've had to practice and work at it," she said in the 2005 television interview, in which she described practicing public speaking in front of a mirror.

She began this training in earnest in 2000, when Governor George W. Bush was running for president and then-Lieutenant Governor Perry had a chance to inherit the state's top job.

"(She) was in a room full of handlers, wondering what will become of me, of me as I know me, what will they try to make of me?" recalled Fran Zone, a coach brought in to help Perry find her way. Zone began by asking her to tell her own story.

"The first thing she talked about was being a nurse and how her father was a doctor, and how proud she was of her father," Zone recalled. Zone also knew that the dedicated nurse was a former cheerleader, and she urged Perry to draw from both backgrounds.

"SHE DIDN'T REMAKE ME, but she gave me the confidence, instilled in me the

confidence, that I needed to get up in front of a crowd," Perry said on television, where she was poised, friendly and had the confidence to joke with her interviewer.

Some recent appearances on the campaign trail have not been as smooth. In Iowa, she gave a lukewarm defense of Texas's job-creation record, a centerpiece of her husband's campaign, saying, "I'm not going to tell you they are all high-paying jobs, but they are a job, even if they are a minimum-wage job, and that's what people are hungry for."

According to CNN, she told a person who had lost his job that she empathized because

a federal regulation required her son, Griffin, to quit his investment banking job in order to campaign for his father. "My son lost his job because of this administration," CNN quoted her as saying.

Still, friends and colleagues say Anita Perry could warm up the campaign. "You're thrust into this. It's either you go or not," she told the Dallas Morning News last year. "Actually, I've come to love it and enjoy it."

(Reporting by Corrie MacLaggan in Austin, Peter Henderson in San Francisco, and Himanshu Ojha in New York; editing by Lee Aitken, and Chris Kaufman in New York)



**FAMILY BUSINESS:** Rick and Anita are joined by their son Griffin in New Hampshire, where the Texas Governor struggled to reclaim his position atop the polls.  
REUTERS/BRIAN SNYDER

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