

Style

Chelsea Clinton is a very public figure. So why does she still feel so distant?

By [Jessica Contrera](#) August 4, 2015 [✉ Email the author](#)

Why do people care about Chelsea Clinton? Five years ago, all she wanted was [a quiet wedding \(of about 500 people\)](#). It required police barricades and a no-fly zone. Reporters chased her guests through the streets while savvy locals hawked Marc-and-Chelsea T-shirts and “I Do” pizzas. The Vera Wang dress, the gluten-free cake, the uninformed estimates of the event’s exorbitant cost — headlines for days.

Chelsea was astonished, her friends say, by the fervor of the world’s curiosity. Realizing that it wouldn’t end with her vows, she wondered what she could do to satisfy the interest. What *responsibility* she had.

“Her grandmother would say to her: ‘This happened to you. Now what are you going to do with it?’ ” explained Anne Hubert, one of Chelsea’s close friends. “Not ‘What are you going to do in spite of it,’ but ‘What are you going to do *with* it?’ ”

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Today, the woman who could become America’s only two-time first daughter has decided: If the spotlight must always shine on her, she might as well use it in her favor. She isn’t quite a celebrity. Or a philanthropist. Or a politician, though let’s not rule that out. Now serving as vice chair of [her family’s foundation](#), she has reinvented herself as a champion of uncontroversial causes, her life an endless string of grand entrances, polite speeches, photo ops — after which she retreats to her eight-figure Manhattan condominium, expecting the media and the public to preserve the boundaries she has cherished since childhood. Polished, practiced and private, Chelsea Clinton is the closest thing America has to a princess.

Chelsea was late. The official itinerary had her arriving 10 minutes after everyone else, but now an additional 25 had passed.

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This day’s appearance was in Denver, near the site of the Clinton Foundation’s June conference. Attendees were gathered to volunteer in a “Day of Action” at a local charity called Project C.U.R.E. At the front door, Girl Scouts held a “Welcome Chelsea!” sign. The foundation’s cameramen stood in position while media members were corralled in a corner.

It would be her familiar routine: Arrive. Wave. Smile. Thank the volunteers. Here, commanding attention, not because of her personal accomplishments but because she is the solo offspring of America’s ultimate power couple.

When her car pulled up, this “Day of Action” unfolded like many of her regular performances. She posed for grip-and-grins. She met preselected local volunteers as they packaged medical supplies for clinics in third-world countries. She listened and nodded with an attentive gaze. Reporters were held back, too far away to hear her, by a kneeling foundation official.

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It didn’t matter that this “Day of Action” was scheduled to last a mere two hours. Or that a busload of the conference’s volunteers never showed. No one asked why Chelsea was so late.

The point was that Chelsea was *there*, and there were photos to prove it.

Waving, smiling, thanking the volunteers.

After four degrees, seven years in the private sector and years of shying from the cameras, this is the life Chelsea Clinton has chosen. The William J. Clinton Foundation has been rebranded as the Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton Foundation. She is said to be a key player, fixated on using hard data to make decisions and, like her mother, eager to promote programs focusing on [women and girls](#). On her watch, the foundation has been through a number of personnel changes, including two much-speculated-about chief executive turnovers, at a time when Hillary’s candidacy has [renewed questions](#) about substantial donations from corporate interests and foreign governments.

Meanwhile, Chelsea plays a role for the public: family ambassador.

“We’re so grateful to Project C.U.R.E. for helping us do the work in the field that we do,” she told the volunteers in a two-minute speech from the top of a loading dock. “And we’re grateful to all of you, for helping ensure that we can do that today and having some fun while we’re doing it.”

She answered no questions, no matter how much reporters begged her media handler. Chelsea will take the attention, but direct it only where she wants it. On this Monday, it was global health. The next day, the reading gap for low-income children. Arts education on Thursday and women’s achievement on Friday.

“She feels a great responsibility to follow through and act on things that matter to her,” said Jen Lee Koss, Chelsea’s Oxford University roommate. “If you have this platform, and you are someone of note, you can use it in a productive way.”



In the next few years, Chelsea could take on a prominent position at the White House, perhaps filling traditional first lady duties. She might become the head of the \$2 billion foundation empire or make her own run at elected office.

But first comes the 2016 campaign, when she will probably serve as one of her mother’s top surrogates — a true test for a person who unwittingly evokes the full range of the nation’s complex feelings about the Clintons.

She is forever remembered as the loyal, curly-haired teen daughter who kept her parents together through the Monica Lewinsky scandal — an episode that is never discussed in Chelsea’s presence but hovers around her, a potent reminder of the sacrifice and resilience required of the families of public servants.

And yet she is also a glossy product of elite alma maters and high-end styling — Donatella Versace takes credit for helping her find her look — which can play into the discomfort some voters harbor about political dynasties. Chelsea would return from Denver to her Manhattan condo and hedge-fund-running husband, Marc Mezvinsky, the son of two former members of Congress. And the next day, the Denver news media would report why she had been running late.



She was [having lunch](#) with her father and their dear family friend Bono.

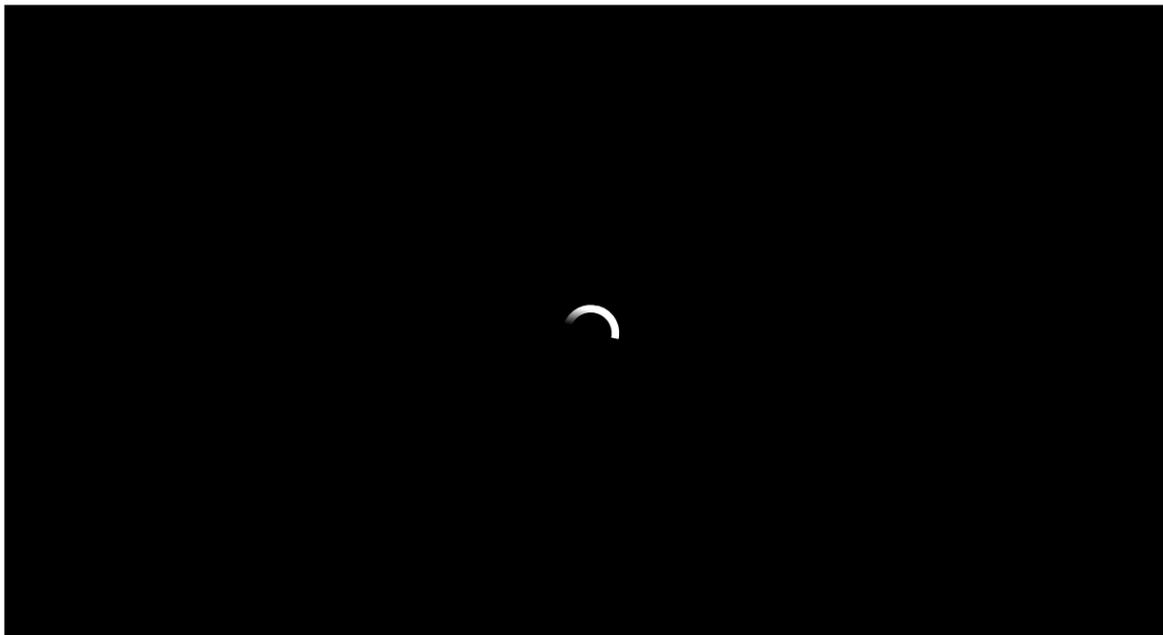
‘Please join me in welcoming today’s featured speaker, Miss Chelsea Clinton!’

She emerged through the curtains in a dark blazer and white blouse, her fifth onstage appearance of the week. Chelsea was in an Orlando resort ballroom for “Collaborate Marketplace,” a convention for corporate meeting planners.

“I’ve been thinking a lot,” she began, “about how much those of us who are blessed to go to these cities and lots of events couldn’t do the work that we do without the work that all of you do.”

Much of Chelsea’s life in the public eye happens behind lecterns, at events that have little in common beyond the excitement of a big-name speaker: the SXSW Interactive Festival in Austin, a dinner for the Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and an address to the Zero Emission Resource Organization in Norway, to name a few.

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Why hire Chelsea to speak? “We knew the forefront her family was going to be in the media, with the upcoming elections,” said the events director for Collaborate Marketplace, Angie Ahrens. Records show that events such as this one, which included a speech, an onstage Q&A and a short photo op, typically bring in between \$10,000 and \$100,000, paid directly to the Clinton Foundation.

After her tailored introduction in Orlando, Chelsea segued into a topic with no particular connection to meeting planners — “No Ceilings,” a Clinton Foundation initiative on the state of women and girls around the world. That’s the package deal: In exchange for bringing her dynastic star power, she gets to hold forth on one of the foundation’s causes — elephant conservation, perhaps, or obesity. Service programs, or diarrhea in Africa, or child marriage, or clean water.

“She is one of our most effective communicators about what the foundation does and how our work is impactful,” said Maura Pally, the foundation’s former acting chief executive.

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Chelsea smiles as she speaks slowly, methodically turning her gaze from one side of the audience to the other. Even without notes, she can sound as if she is reading from a script. She deploys cute one-liners about her parents or [her 10-month-old daughter, Charlotte](#), to break up long strings of memorized statistics.

“Women are now 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs, and that’s an all-time high,” she said. “There are more men named William, James and John on boards of Fortune 500 companies than there are women.”

Her only moment of seeming spontaneity is one she uses frequently: A section of the crowd shouted “Woo!” after she name-checked Little Rock, and she joked, “Yes, you can cheer.”

“It’s just great to see,” one middle-aged woman in the audience said. “She’s really come into her own.”

Yes, she has – but then again, she *is* 35 years old.

A fixture in Manhattan’s celebrity-sphere, Chelsea’s visits to the theater (“The King and I” at Lincoln Center, “The Iceman Cometh” at the Brooklyn Academy of Music) and hot restaurants (Orso in Hell’s Kitchen, Brooklyn’s *Antica Pesa*) are chronicled as dutifully as her attendance at charity galas. She hosts dinner parties, mostly for groups of close friends she met in school. Her name occasionally pops up on VIP guest lists, including for Timbaland’s birthday party and Matt Damon’s Caribbean vow renewal.

Yet there remains, for many, a subtle surprise in seeing the adult Chelsea. Her growing up was kept at such a distance from the eyes of America that people can forget it even happened.

“You’ve got to protect Chelsea at all costs,” Jackie Kennedy Onassis warned her mother, according to Hillary Clinton’s book [“Living History.”](#) “Surround her with friends and family, but don’t spoil her. Don’t let her think she’s someone special or entitled. Keep the press away from her if you can, and don’t let anyone use her.”

So Chelsea went to private school. Photographers were scolded for taking pictures of her cat, Socks. When NBC followed the president for a feature on his typical day, Hillary wouldn’t let the cameras show Chelsea doing her homework, even when Tom Brokaw begged. Mostly, the media complied: Brace-faced puberty is traumatic even when the world isn’t watching.

At Stanford, Chelsea’s dorm was fitted with bulletproof windows, and the student newspaper pledged not to write about her life on campus. (No such policy for her fellow ’90s undergrads Reese Witherspoon and Tiger Woods.) When one columnist insisted on penning a story, [he was fired.](#)

“There are a lot of presidents who will say, ‘My daughter is off limits,’ ” said Doug Wead, a presidential family historian. “It’s another thing to pick up a phone and call a producer or an editor to tell them off on a story, and that’s what the Clintons did.”

People magazine got such a call before running a story on how Chelsea was handling her father’s pending impeachment, [CNN later reported.](#) The sympathy the world felt for Chelsea at that time extended the media’s hands-off agreement well into her adulthood. When she enrolled at Oxford for the first of her three graduate degrees, when she sat front row at a Versace fashion show in Milan, even when she began campaigning for her mother, there were no interviews.

Chelsea seemed tied to a private life that was a model of conscientious good behavior. Her friends and co-workers say she had a compulsion for studying up on what she didn’t know, answering late-night e-mails and striving to make others comfortable around her at her early jobs in consulting and finance.

“It’s probably always in the back of her mind in every opportunity she has had,” said Elizabeth Weindruch, Chelsea’s best friend from Arkansas. “If anything, she’s trying to prove she’s not there just because she’s Chelsea Clinton — she’s there because she is qualified.”

Usually, it has worked.

“Chelsea was extremely adept at analyzing struggling chemicals companies,” said Matt Kimble, her former boss at the hedge fund Avenue Capital. “There’s no question she could have stayed onboard.”

“She could be a full-time, tenure-track professor, if that’s the path she wanted,” said Michael Sparer at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, where Chelsea got a master’s and now teaches a course as an adjunct. “But at this point, I don’t think that’s the path she’s heading down.”

Instead, she unexpectedly launched a new career in media. In November 2011 — just after the death of Dorothy Rodham, the grandmother who urged her to find a purpose for her fame — Chelsea joined NBC News, home to scions including Jenna Bush Hager and Luke Russert.

But despite a reported [\\$600,000 salary](#), Chelsea left a lackluster impression with her feel-good “Making a Difference” segments. As she made cornbread with kids at an after-school program or toured a juvenile detention facility, critics bashed her on-air performances as awkward, self-conscious or just plain dull.

“It’s a noble sentiment, but it doesn’t make a lot of sense,” [the New York Times wrote.](#) “Because of her last name, there are plenty of ways to do good works and publicize worthy causes besides becoming a television newscaster.”

In August 2014, she announced that she was leaving NBC to focus on her family and the foundation. The job — her first attempt at being a “purposefully public” person — is not mentioned in any foundation-approved paragraph about her career. Her staff says that is just an oversight.

‘Anyone here from Hilton Head Island?’ the moderator in Orlando asked the crowd. It was time for the Q&A, where the questions were light — and all pre-approved by Chelsea.

“Wikipedia says you met your husband on Hilton Head Island. We have four or five hotels from Hilton Head — which one is your favorite?”

Chelsea laughed, dodging the question to confirm that yes, she did meet him there when she was 12.

“We were friends for half of our lives before we started dating,” she said.

The crowd smiled. These generic personal tidbits are the most Chelsea will dole out. Her staff denied repeated requests for an interview for this story, saying the best use of Chelsea’s time is discussing the foundation’s work. When an interview is given, it is arranged with the understanding that the reporter will ask Chelsea about her issue of the moment.

Reporters granted time with her could stray, of course, but they rarely do. Everyone seems to have internalized that Chelsea doesn’t have to talk about anything she doesn’t want to. When Elle [put her on its cover](#) in May, the fashion magazine’s staffers were warned that if Chelsea was asked about politics or scandals of the past, she would have nothing new to say.

Instead, she is asked the first-daughter questions she has been asked all her life.

Did she want her mom to run? Almost word for word, she told Elle, the Hollywood Reporter, Fusion and “Live! With Kelly and Michael,” “My mom is my mom” and “I want her to make whatever choice is right for her.”

Will she run for office someday? She told CNN, Fast Company, Sky News, Fortune and the “Today” show, “Right now I live in a city and a state and a country where I support my elected officials.” If that were to change, “then I’d have to ask and answer that question.”

The reality is that no matter what Chelsea accomplishes, the world will still see her as the daughter of Bill and Hillary. It’s what happens to all first children. Webb Hayes started a chemical company, was awarded the Medal of Honor and established the first presidential library — but was forever known as a son of Rutherford B. Hayes. John Eisenhower reached the top ranks of American military historians, but his obituaries were headlined “son of a president.”

“You’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” said Lynda Robb, the eldest daughter of Lyndon B. Johnson. “There will always be people who say you got the job not because of what you are capable of or because of your talents, but because of who your parents were.”

Chelsea sought and obtained jobs based on her merit. But she left them for the spot she inherited in the royal family business: a place where quotes are scripted and chiefs of staff are close at hand.

“You grew up with your parents in the spotlight,” the moderator in Florida asked her next. “Do you remember a time when your father wasn’t governor?”

“Well, when I was born my father was governor,” Chelsea replied, “so I don’t remember that.”

The crowd laughed at her joke and her peculiar reality. Thirty of her 35 years have been spent with a parent in public office. Soon, she will be working toward the cause of eight more.

“I’m sure she’ll want to get out there and campaign,” Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta said. “She has a story, as a young mother, that can connect to other young mothers and young people across the country.”

The day after the Orlando event, she joined her parents in New York for Hillary’s official launch. Supporters crowded an H-shaped stage while Chelsea and Marc took a seat to the side. She didn’t come to the lectern to introduce Hillary, as some had expected. She didn’t speak at all. Her job was to get onstage after the speech, hug her mom and kiss Marc for the cameras.

Smile. Wave. All she had to do was show up.

Correction: An earlier version of this story stated that Chelsea Clinton was late to the Day of Action because she went to lunch with her father and Bono. A Clinton Foundation spokesperson said Chelsea attended the lunch earlier in the day but her lateness was due to Denver traffic.

 **488 Comments**



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Jessica Contrera is a reporter on The Washington Post’s features team. She has written about Generation Z, workplace sexual harassment and people from across the country whose lives are being shaped by issues in the news. [Follow](#) 

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