

Legions of Shriver supporters say future is bright

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Sunday, May 22, 2011



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California's former first lady Maria Shriver has made it her hallmark to celebrate women as

"architects of change" - but the author, activist, journalist and mother of four always offered a more circumspect view of herself as simply "a work in progress."

What comes next for Shriver - personally, professionally and politically - may now be played out on the public stage in the wake of the scandal involving her husband, former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who last week admitted having a child with a housekeeper more than a decade ago while married to Shriver. The couple announced their separation earlier this month.

"She has one of the strongest personal and professional 'brands' out there - and that's something to her eternal credit," said author and business communications expert Ruth Sherman, a former faculty member of the Women's Campaign School at Yale University.

"She kept it going, and she never really allowed herself to be overshadowed by her marriage to Schwarzenegger," said Sherman, who is also a blogger for Fast Company magazine. "I don't think her brand or professional options are curtailed or tarnished in the least. Especially because the support for her is unbelievable; it's 100 percent positive."

Last week, Shriver got a standing ovation when she made a surprise appearance to honor retiring talk-show icon and longtime friend, Oprah Winfrey, and some sources suggest the former journalist may be exploring a future talk show in conjunction with the Winfrey communications empire.

'Maria inc.'

There are also reports Shriver may be exploring the possibility of expanding the venture that some people refer to as Maria Inc. - her enormously successful women's motivational conferences - elsewhere in the United States and in other countries.

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With millions of people watching a family meltdown at the highest political levels, experts say Shriver's dignity in confronting trauma has only served to bolster her profile among women, who have always been her most loyal base.

Even those who have long been politically opposed to the views of Shriver, a Democrat and member of the Kennedy family, say she has won their abiding respect.

"It's a tragedy - and many of us women in the world have experienced betrayal," said attorney Harmeet Dhillon, who heads the Republican Party in San Francisco. "I have no word to defend the governor. ... I'm the chairman of the party - and I don't think of anybody who thinks of her negatively."

Business, political and motivational experts said Shriver's ability to hold her head high in the midst of a tabloid feeding frenzy only underscores her personal appeal.

'The pain'

"Right now, I can only imagine what she must be feeling ... the pain," said feminist author Gloria Feldt, the former president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America who wrote the best-selling "No Excuses: Nine Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power."

"The irony is after all the work she's done with her women's conferences to promote the idea that women are powerful and can do anything, this is a terrible irony," Feldt said of the revelations about Schwarzenegger.

"If anything, the recent events show she did not need to be on the arm of any man to have money, prestige and political power," said Feldt. "Whatever was holding her back is gone. She has a platform that she's built for herself and she has the financial capability; she can illustrate the old formulas are gone."

Many say she already has.

Shriver long ago established herself as a tireless activist for women's issues and disability issues, and a talented communicator on television, Sherman said, but more recently she has shown herself to be an astute social media communicator, using Twitter and Facebook to help her cultivate and maintain legions of loyal fans.

Sold-out annual event

Under Shriver's guidance, the nonprofit California Governor and First Lady's Women's Conference morphed into a sold-out annual event that attracted upward of 20,000 women a year - along with a parade of A-list Hollywood stars, authors, politicians and motivational speakers.

While celebrating women of achievement at all levels, Shriver's Women's Conference presented retailers with a gold mine of marketing opportunities. Shriver delighted fans by roaming the convention's football field-size hall packed with armies of businesses, from upscale designers such as Ann Taylor to mass retailers like Target.

New venues and ventures

The conference was suspended this year, in part because Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) cut funding for the first lady's office, but Shriver associates say she has not ruled out new venues and ventures that would extend its franchise.

Sherman said that's entirely possible because Shriver not only understands her audience - she instinctively knows how to communicate with them.

"There are an endless supply of women entrepreneurs, business women, women looking for their next corporate job, and there's a need that women feel to attend these events," said Sherman. That created demand, she said, and a feeling that "if I'm in the West, and Maria Shriver is having something - I'm going to go."

Many of those who know and have worked with Shriver predict that last week's tabloid news will soon be history.

"She is perfectly capable of rising from the ashes," said longtime friend Barbara O'Connor, professor emerita of political communication at Cal State Sacramento.

Cheering her on

Shriver's core audience - typical California women - are cheering her on as she takes her next steps.

"The best thing to do when you're kicked around and heartbroken is to fluff your hair and show up on 'Oprah,' " Merced Republican Lucille Mejia said last week. "Talk about ravishing! She was gorgeous."

As for the former governor, Mejia scoffed, he should "sit back and say, 'Look what I lost.' "

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/05/22/MNJR1JISK2.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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