

The Little Girl and the President

by Julie Beckett

Last month we told the story of Katie Beckett and how President Reagan's intervention allowed her to be taken care of at home by her family. Here Julie Beckett relates the story of the memorable first meeting between Katie and the President.

It was one of the happiest days my family and I have ever shared. It was a beautiful September morning. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and we were headed toward the airport to say "thank you" to one of the most powerful men in the world — the President of the United States.

He didn't come to town just to see us, but we were pleased he asked to see us personally. About a week before the Presidential visit we had been contacted by a White House advance man who relayed to us that the President would be "very pleased if we could meet him at the plane" (Air Force 1). It didn't take me long to tell him we would be very honored. Details were smoothed out over the next few days and the anticipation made the wait almost unbearable.

Julie Beckett looks on as President Reagan greets the little girl who he says made him "happiest in his presidency."

Julie Beckett is the mother of Katie Beckett.



Katie and the President — a historic first meeting between two people whose lives touched each other in the most meaningful way.

But the day had finally arrived. It was expected that crowds would number in the tens of thousands; it's not everyday the President comes to Iowa. We decided we should leave home at least an hour before we were due in case of any traffic hangups.

We performed our morning routine with Katie as we do every morning. But today was special from the very beginning. Dressed in her gray window pane-checked dress with the wide lace collar and pink sash, she looked more beautiful than ever. It was hard to believe this little six-year-old was the same toddler who came home just a little over two years ago — and all because of him. I just kept thinking "won't he be proud."

We arrived early at the airport and saw some of the Republican dignitaries, including former Governor Robert Ray, now president of Life Investors, Inc., one of the largest international businesses in Cedar Rapids. Louie, the advance man who we became very familiar with over the telephone, told us where he would like us to stand. To our surprise, only the governor of Iowa, Terry Brandstad, and two state re-election committee co-chairmen would also be in the reception line. We thought we would be one of several hundred, and instead we were one of six.

We were kept in a holding place near the hangar and, wouldn't you know, just as the plane was circling overhead, Katie had to use the restroom. It must have been all of the excitement. We hurried around and were able to get back just as the plane touched the ground. We





In an emotional moment for the Beckett family, Mark Beckett meets the man who brought his family together.

marched out to the red carpet, the door opened, and out stepped the man of the hour.

His auburn hair, his rosy cheeks, his warm broad style — he looked much younger than I felt at the moment. About half-way down the stairs Katie peeked around everybody else. Her eyes met the President's and a glow came over his face. He made pleasantries with the three important dignitaries, and when he took my hand, I welcomed him and said my "thank you" and presented Mary Katherine Beckett. He reached down and she put her arms around his neck. He picked her up, holding her close, her head on his shoulder as if it always belonged there. A tear fell down his cheek (I could barely see myself), and as he put her down he said, "This is the happiest thing I've done in my presidency." He took my husband's hand, and Mark thanked him, tears welling in his eyes. I was

one of the happiest women in the world. Here was the President of the United States telling us Katie was as important to him as she was to us. Our life, as a family, has truly been a turnabout since the first few years.

We listened to his speech at the airport, talking about the tragedy in Beirut that had occurred that morning — the only thing dampening our day. He talked of his meeting Katie for the first time, and how very important she was to him personally and to the nation as a whole. We were rushed away before his speech was concluded so that we could join him later for an old-fashioned church picnic sponsored by the Republican party of Iowa. Sitting across the table from the President was an awesome feeling. The governor from Iowa sat to my left. Katie, as you can imagine, was not at all interested in eating, and walked back and forth

between the President and me as if he were just what he kept calling her, "his friend." The conversation over lunch evolved around the election and the enthusiasm of the young people during the campaign. The autograph seekers closed in early before the President was bustled off to speak. He talked of the grand tradition of Iowans, his days in Des Moines, and the importance of maintaining the Midwest work ethic. Before I knew it he was finished, the governor was thanking me for having lunch with him, and a sense of pride, understanding, and love came over me. The President's strength and his sense of fairness left me with a warm feeling, happy to have been a part of a very beautiful day, knowing that things will never quite be the same between my family and his.

Thank you, Mr. President, for everything you have done for us. ●