

Life of a clergyman's wife explored in *Unconverted*



BOOK TOUR: Episcopal Bishop Alfred Robert Hirschfeld (right) and wife Polly Merritt Ingraham, who just wrote a new book about their marriage, *Unconverted, Memoir of a Marriage*.

Memoir of marriage has Northport roots

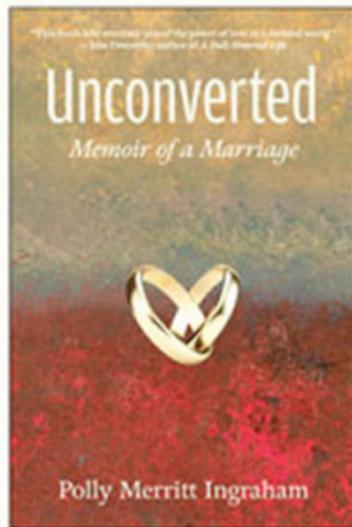
'75 graduate comes home for reunion, book events

By David Ambro

When Northport native Polly Merritt Ingraham wed Episcopal Bishop Alfred Robert Hirschfeld, the tenth and current bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire, it was a marriage made in heaven—well, read the book.

Ms. Ingraham, one of five siblings of the Ingraham family of Locust Road, Northport, recently wrote *Unconverted, Memoir of a Marriage*, published by Rootstock Publishing, of Montpelier, Vermont, and released June 17. It is a story about her upbringing in Northport, vignettes of which are sprinkled throughout the book, her sometimes discomfiting relationship with religion, her love affair with an Episcopal minister, and the family of three children they have nurtured together.

A 1975 Northport High School graduate, Ms. Ingraham will be back home this weekend for her 50-year high school reunion. While she is in town, Ms. Ingraham and Bishop Hirschfeld will talk about the book during a forum at Temple Beth El in Huntington. Rabbi



Jeff Clopper will host the event, and they will talk about Ms. Ingraham's book and their marriage. Bishop Hirschfeld will then return to New Hampshire to officiate Sunday service, while Ms. Ingraham will stay in her hometown for an event at Northport Books, 127 Main Street, Northport, Sunday, October 12, at 11 a.m., during which her conversation partner will be Northport High School Class of 1975 classmate Kevin Barry, of Asharoken.

During the Northport Books event, Mr. Barry will pose questions about the book, which they will discuss. He will then field questions from the audience. In advance of the event, *Unconverted*, which has earned a Literary Titan Award and an International Firebird Book Award, can be purchased online at www.comfoodcouncil.org

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rootstockpublishing.com, at amazon.com, or at Northport Books.

During an interview this week from her Concord, New Hampshire home, Ms. Ingraham talked about writing the book, its themes, her family and upbringing in Northport, and her marriage to Bishop Hirschfeld, whom she refers to familiarly throughout the book as Rob.

"As clergy spouses, we often get conflated with our spouses. People assume we are the same, and that's one of the number of reasons that made me want to write this story," she said.

Ms. Ingraham is the youngest of five children of Barbara and Henry Gardner Ingraham, the sister to four brothers, Mike, the late Sandy, Steven, and Rob. In her book, she writes about the Locust Road property they grew up on, most of which is now a Town of Huntington nature preserve bearing their name. She discloses that she did not have a religious upbringing, but that she had occasion to visit some of the named churches Northport has to offer.

"Sometimes, on Christmas Eve or Easter morning, I went with my across-the-street friend Lynn and her family down to the Episcopal church. These were photo opportunities—she and her sister in brighter-colored dresses and patent leather shoes, her younger two brothers spruced up and sheepish about it. I remember the pews; the plush red velvet kneeler we would set down at a certain point in the service; nothing about the sermon, except that, once back home, everyone snickered about the clergyman who couldn't keep his conservative political stance out of the pulpit. It all felt so temporary; as a visitor, I could appreciate the novelty without delving into any big questions," Ms. Ingraham writes.

While religion was a photo op then, Ms. Ingraham writes about some of the things her family did worship, including riding horses and playing hockey on The Cove in Crab Meadow. Her brother Rob has since built an ice hockey rink at his Northport home, which was once their grandfather's. A graduate of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, she played hockey on a club team there.

"We were chased by a couple of Minnesotan frat boys, and we played in a beautiful, brightly lit area, drawing a sprinkling of fans, some of whom guffawed more than cheered," she writes. "It was empowering. On subzero evenings, as I made the long

trek back to the dorm from practice, my nostrils stuck together, and I noticed just about every part of my well-used body tingling."

While there are memories and vignettes about Northport and its environs peppered through the book, including days playing in the sand at Asharoken Beach or distant memories of her grandparents' boat, The Sonora, moored offshore, it is a story about her romance and love affair with Rob, and finding her place in the spiritual world where he excels.

Why now?

Ms. Ingraham said she did not suddenly decide to write about being the spouse of a clergyman. She said it is a project that has been in the works for a dozen years. "It takes a long time to write a book," she said, and credited GrubStreet Memoir Incubator, a year-long writing workshop, with getting her "over the hump."

Ms. Ingraham said it was a project of perseverance. When her husband was a clergyman at Grace Church in Amherst, Massachusetts, she would take her children to Sunday for service. "It was when I was sitting in the pew Sunday after Sunday with my children and looking at my husband up at the front, I started thinking, 'How did I get here?' I never dreamed I would be coming to a church like this, Sunday after Sunday, based on my Ingraham childhood," she said. "It was that experience of the regularity of going to church and then realizing that marriage really is amazing sometimes, and how it changes your life. And,



Author Polly Merritt Ingraham and her husband, Rob, enjoy a boat ride.

for me, it changed my life in a major way."

While the book is a story of a clergyman's spouse, Ms. Ingraham said it is also intended to preserve the life she had growing up in Northport and the experiences she enjoyed with her brothers and their friends. "It seemed to me that there was something really good about that way of life. So, in writing the book, I was trying to integrate it sometimes," she said.

Since the book has been published, Ms. Ingraham has had two bookstore events talking about *Unconverted*, one in Concord, New Hampshire, near her home, and the other in Massachusetts, both of which drew large audiences. She said the feedback was gratifying, readers sharing that they found it brave to

take on this subject matter.

"This is clearly a love story, people say, which I am gratified by because that's what I want. And, they say I really open up and share a lot," she said. "I am struck by how several people are both admiring and appreciative of the way that I have revealed our marriage, and also a little amazed. Some people tell me they could never do that. It leaves me scratching my head sometimes and asking, 'Yeah, did I really do that?'"

While she was writing the book, Ms. Ingraham said her husband was aware of what she was doing and that it was important to her. She would give him things to read along the way, offering occasional input. She then provided him with the final transcript to read in case there was anything he was uncomfortable with. He

told her it was beautiful and all okay with him.

"He would never be inclined to try to write a book about our marriage, but once he heard from me, it was something important to me, he was as supportive as he could be," she said, adding that Bishop Hirschfeld has written two books, including one about dealing with depression.

One of the themes of the book that portrays the challenge of being a clergyman's spouse is moving. She said she has moved often, from Connecticut, Boston, and New Hampshire. As a child, she did not move, and her family has been in the same Northport location for four generations. "I had some friends who would sometimes move away, but for our Ingraham family, there was a sense of deep roots right on that hillside [on Locust Road]. Why would we want to go anywhere else?" she said.

Now married, though, Ms. Ingraham has moved often and said each time it is wrenching for her. She said her husband's vision of the world is that wherever there is an Episcopal church, he feels at home. "That's not how I roll. My friendships take a long time to develop and they are lasting," she said. That's why Ms. Ingraham is excited to be coming back to Northport this weekend for her 50-year reunion. She still has a half dozen high school classmates with whom she has remained close friends, two of whom helped her make arrangements for the upcoming events at the temple on Thursday and at Northport Books on Sunday.

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