

Interview:

Elizabeth Ray

How California helped make Liz what she is today

by Karen Feld



Photo: Jim Cornfield

When I first met Elizabeth Ray in August, 1972, she had been a "secretary" on Capitol Hill for only a matter of weeks. I was a reporter and columnist for *Roll Call*, Congress's only newspaper. In her recently published book, *The Washington Fringe Benefit*, Elizabeth credits *Roll Call* with having launched her name into congressional cloak rooms and the House gym locker room. One of my weekly newspaper assignments was to select and interview "one of Capitol Hill's magnificent new lovelies." This bit of cheesecake sold newspapers, insisted my then-bachelor editor.

On one such assignment, I happened to stroll by the office of Congressman Ken Gray (D-Ill.), who had a reputation for hiring some of Washington's best-looking females. Elizabeth smiled invitingly from the reception desk. Immediately, I knew she was to be my next *Roll Call* Pinup. "The *Roll Call* story made our side of the Hill look like Mount Vesuvius on a bad day," Liz reflects in her book.

In the four short years since Elizabeth Ray began the job as just another Capitol Hill "clerk," as all are officially called, her name has dominated many of the headlines throughout the world. Her sudden notoriety, since her revelation several months ago that she was the mistress of one of Congress's most feared and powerful men—Congressman Wayne Hays (D-Ohio)—and on the federal payroll for \$14,000 a year at taxpayers' expense, has had a dramatic effect on her life. Elizabeth then followed the newsbreak with the release of a Dell paperback in which she tells of sex and politics and how she was passed from one legislator to another as a "fringe benefit," in order to secure the latter's vote on an important bill.

This time, a summer day in Los Angeles, I met with Elizabeth to put her story in perspective and try to humanize the sensationalized headlines. We discussed the California segment of her life, rather than merely her Washington world. She re-

vealed the innermost feelings of a woman who has been represented—or misrepresented, as the reader may choose to interpret—as a sex symbol and political groupie. There is an almost tragic and pathetic side to her.

In March, 1975, Liz put her furniture in storage, shipped her chocolate brown Corvette with "LIZ II" tags, packed her personal belongings, bid good-bye to her Washington friends, and boarded a plane for Los Angeles to pursue her childhood dream to be a movie star. She moved into a one-bedroom apartment with rental furniture in a Doheny Drive luxury high-rise building adjacent to Beverly Hills. The building, used as a location for many films and television episodes, had a doorman; tennis court, which she never used; swimming pool and Jacuzzi, where she often sunned bikini-clad; and—uppermost in her mind—an important address. Her neighbors included: then-heavyweight champion George Foreman; recording

artists Jackie Jackson, and two of the Temptations; John Travolta, star of *Welcome Back, Kotter*; Alice Marchak, Marlon Brando's former secretary and coauthor of *Supersees*; a former studio head; screenwriter Robert Merrill; Sara Kennedy, Goldie Hawn's replacement on *Laugh-In*, and now a top star of commercials; and the mistresses of at least one well-known television celebrity.

Yvonne Dunleavy, her collaborator, visited Elizabeth at this apartment in the summer of 1975 to tape Liz's story for the book. During this time, Congressman Hays tied up her telephone, as did other notables.

In just a few short months, Liz discovered Hollywood was a tough town and very cliquish. She enrolled in Lee Strasberg's acting school, and tried to make as many contacts in the "business" as she could. But she was an outsider trying to break in, and it wasn't easy. A lot of promises, but not even a bit part. She felt rejected and very much alone. She even ate by herself much of the time at Nate 'n' Al's, a popular Beverly Hills deli, or Dan Tana's, an in-spot for many people in the entertainment industry. She always hoped to meet a celebrity or top producer.

No progress. Five months passed. No parts, and her funds had run out. She couldn't even land a job as a cocktail waitress. Liz packed her bags rather suddenly and flew back to Washington, back to Capitol Hill, back to Wayne Hays and the environment that was all too familiar.

Familiar, but a long way from the poverty of those backwoods of rural North Carolina. She was raised in Marshall, a town of 15,000 in the Blue Ridge Mountains. An illegitimate child, she hid under her grandmother's front porch to avoid being put in an orphanage. She used to scrape mold off bread so she'd have something to eat.

In interviewing Liz, I am struck by her extreme warmth and sensitivity. Her consciousness has been raised somewhat, and she has matured a great deal since her first days on Capitol Hill. Her life hasn't been easy. Her cries of loneliness are almost desperate. She wants someone to hear her. There's a constant reaching out for that important other, who is not yet within her grasp. Her only full-time companions are a nurse and a miniature French poodle, Marius.

I found her strong drive and determination admirable. She used what she had in terms of assets, and was determined to rise—in the only way she knew how—



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above her unhappy and tormented youth, and fragmented family history.

Despite what seem like worldly experiences, at age 33, a kind of country naivete permeates. Liz's hair is long and blonde, flows rather naturally, just barely covering one eye. Her complexion is pale, lightly made up, and her smile is warm and radiant. A slight southern tinge can be detected in her speech. Her curvaceous figure is one of her best assets and is noticeable even when hidden beneath the most tailored outfit, such as the tight-fitting pants and teasingly transparent shirt she wears today. I can't help but feel that her total image is not as wholesome as she'd like, but she has a look that both men and women notice—the latter with envy.

Q: How would you describe yourself?

A: I don't always say or do the right thing—that is, what's proper. But my intentions are good. I never mean to hurt people. I'm an honest person. I've done some things which weren't right. I feel very badly and ashamed about them. Inside, I have a lot

of sensitive feelings and love that people don't see, because they think of me as a cold person, an abrasive and tough person who tries to use people to get somewhere. That isn't true. I feel I did what I had to do to survive—not to have riches and wealth, but to survive, to eat.

Q: What about a physical description of yourself?

A: I'm attractive.

Q: Often people who attain sudden notoriety become very isolated and lonely. You've heard the expression, "It's lonely at the top." Do you think this has happened to you?

A: Definitely. Like a storm, everybody's running from me. It's a very sad feeling, a very uncomfortable feeling not to have many friends.

Q: Have those people who were your friends before the book was published stuck by you?

A: A few of my girl friends are still around, but not too many.

Q: Do you see any solution to your loneliness?

A: I'll have to leave Washington, where the whole thing happened. That town is like Peyton Place. I have to start new, in a new town—maybe Los Angeles.

Q: What attracts you to politicians?

A: I guess it's the control, the power. Coming from where I did, it's fascinating to be with people who make decisions and laws. If they want favors from me, then I feel I have a little bit of control over them.

Q: Liz Ray memorabilia has become almost as common in Washington these days as political memorabilia. What's your feeling about such items as the T-shirts reading, "Ex-Congressional Secretary," the campaign buttons worn by some Capitol Hill secretaries reading, "I Can Type," and the Wanted posters, going up in various Capitol Hill offices with a revealing photo of you, that read, "This woman is known to make you take her to dinner and then to ruin your career. All young politicians should take care. If approached by her, do not run, simply ignore her. If she makes advances, do not attempt to apprehend her, she is dangerous. She is known to lure people to her apartment and torture them with sexual misconduct. She can ruin your career?"

A: It embarrasses me. Some people think I did this to get notoriety. But that wasn't it. I just couldn't go back to North Carolina to be made fun of and be treated and live as I did as a child. It disturbs me that things turned out the way they did; but as bad as they are, it's better than my childhood. ♦

Q: You experienced a brief Los Angeles adventure last year, and now you're back on a publicity visit to promote your book. Have your feelings about the place and people changed during the year?

A: California hasn't changed, but I have.

Q: How have you changed?

A: When I was living here before I was struggling and hoping, maybe someday, to make it as an actress, or even get a small part. Now, when I walk around Beverly Hills with my agent and nurse/companion, autograph seekers and reporters follow me. I'm being pursued by producers to make movie deals. It makes me feel like I'm somebody for a change. Now I feel I'm one of the people who belong here, instead of being the poverty-stricken person I was when I lived here.

Q: How did you actually feel when you lived in Los Angeles?

A: Rejected. I dated very little. I was alone a lot. I cried a lot. I didn't get in with the Hollywood people. I spent most of my time by myself.

Q: Do you think you'll feel differently about dealing with Hollywood people in the entertainment industry now?

A: I am comfortable with these people, now that I have a name. A year ago I wasn't. Recently, I ate dinner at the Palm with my attorney. Telly Savalas was there. When he got up to go to the men's room, girls rushed over to him for an autograph. When I went to the ladies' room, men rushed over. Telly invited me over to his table and told me he admired me. It's a great feeling that someone who is so important would know me. Men who I unsuccessfully tried to make contact with last year now rush over to me. One guy who said my speech was terrible the year before said, "Oh, your voice sounds so much better this year."

Q: Do you think your speech actually sounded better or was he just saying that?

A: I haven't had any voice lessons, so it couldn't have changed.

Q: Well, how does that make you feel? How do you know what to believe?

A: It makes me feel good, but it also makes me feel badly. All my life I felt used, or I allowed myself to be used, so that I didn't have to go back to the poverty I came from. I never felt accepted. Now people are telling me because I'm a celebrity they'll accept me.

Q: Have you received any film offers?

A: I've agreed to star in an R-rated film, *The Washington Fringe Benefit*, in which I'll be playing myself. Joe Solomon will



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produce, and release is scheduled for December of this year.

Q: Is there a specific kind of role that you'd like to play in future movies?

A: The Marilyn Monroe-type roles—the bitchy type that also combine humor and love. I like to make people laugh. Maybe even a Goldie Hawn-type role—a cross between something funny and something sexy and cute, but with meaning.

Q: How do you feel about X-rated films, or doing nude or seminude scenes?

A: I've turned down some of these already. If it's a meaningful film, some nudity is all right, but not for its own sake. And definitely not an X-rated film.

Q: Do you think there's any future for you in Hollywood now? Can you project anything long-term for yourself within the industry?

A: Yes, I'm looking forward to several movie roles and a career as an actress. I've also had some speaking and recording offers, but I see myself in film.

Q: Why have you always had this strong drive to be an actress? What's your earliest memory of this obsessive desire?

A: Because I was always made fun of in

school and put down by my family. I wanted to be someone. I was 12 when I first saw a television set. I knew then that I wanted to be on the screen.

Q: In your book you write that Marilyn Monroe has always been your idol. You've gone out of your way to meet so many of the people who knew her well, and to recreate certain aspects of her life for yourself. Why?

A: When I was in school people told me I reminded them of her physically, so I picked up on it. She was an orphan. So many aspects of our lives are parallel.

Q: Who are your favorite actors or actresses today?

A: Robert Redford, Paul Newman, and Goldie Hawn.

Q: Do you think being an actress is compatible with being a woman?

A: I don't see why not. Even if you don't play the role of a lady, you can still be one.

Q: Is there any person whom you especially admire or have great respect for?

A: Joe DiMaggio. He's the most fascinating person I've ever been with.

Q: Who has been the greatest influence on your life?

A: My doctors and my grandmother. My book is dedicated to them.

Q: What role did your grandmother play?

A: She was the only person who ever told me she loved me, the only person I ever had in my life who used to say, "I hope you have a home someday and someone who loves you." I dedicated this book to her, not because this is what she wanted me to do, but because I really loved her.

Q: How does it feel to know your name is a household word and to see your caricature on the cover of national magazines? Now that you've been pushed into the public eye and appeared on television, how does reality compare with your fantasy of this sort of recognition?

A: It all happened so fast. It's really strange. I'm just now beginning to realize that the whole world knows about me. Somebody gave me a paper in a restaurant the other night and I was front page headlines. It was a Saudi Arabia paper. I don't even know where Saudi Arabia is. It's a lot to cope with emotionally. I can't go anywhere now without people knowing who I am. I need privacy sometimes.

Q: If you're concerned about privacy, why did you agree to have your photo appear in this month's *Playboy*?

A: They came to Washington last spring to photograph women for a Washington issue. I went for the test shot and was selected. This happened prior to the book.

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Q: What's the reaction of people who recognize you in an airport or supermarket?

A: I'd say it's 90 percent good. Even little kids come up and ask me to sign napkins, Kleenex, even their hands—anything they can find to write on. It's a good feeling. I'm flattered. I went into Saks one day to buy shoes, and they didn't have my size. I asked the salesman if he could order them for me. He was really nasty and said no. So I made a second choice. When I took out my charge plate, he said, "Oh, you're Ms. Ray. Of course we can order them." People treat me differently now. It's both good and bad.

Q: In the book, you speak rather harshly of Robbie, your mother. You say, "To her I was the living reminder of a roll in the hay." When she visited you in Washington, you said you asked her to take a bath and spit out her chewing tobacco so she wouldn't embarrass you. What is her reaction to the book and the whole series of recent events?

A: I called to tell her I was going to be on television, because I thought she'd be hurt if I didn't call her. She said she wasn't going to watch me. I cried, because it really

hurt me. To think, all these years I've been trying to make it, and she turns off her set.

Q: Although you say the characters in the book are all composites, have any people identified themselves and contacted you? How did they react?

A: Yes, some liked it. As long as they were disguised, they didn't seem to mind. Some sent me telegrams congratulating me. Of course, they signed their fictitious names.

Q: If you had it to do over again, would you have written the book?

A: I would have done the book, but wouldn't have gone to the newspapers, and wouldn't have named names. Sometimes, I wish I could turn back time and be back on the Hill again.

Q: Why is that?

A: It had a homey feeling. I miss the people. I drove by on the Fourth of July and started to cry.

Q: Do you have any advice for other Capitol Hill secretaries who may find themselves in a similar position?

A: Learn to type.

Q: Do you want to make any changes in yourself or your personal life?

A: I want to find someone who loves me. I'd like to get married.

Q: What, if anything, have you learned from your experience on the Hill?

A: I've learned how to deal with people and how to handle myself better. If you really are determined enough and want something badly enough as I did, you can usually get it. I couldn't give up. People say, "Why didn't you just go back to the small town?" I couldn't turn back. There wasn't any way. I want a chance to be an actress and prove to myself I can do it.

Q: You did a lot of self-disclosing in the book. Do you regret any of this now?

A: If I'd had final approval of the galleys I would have changed a lot. The wording is low class. It's not my words. I wouldn't have gone into such explicit sexual detail. I would have told more about my background before Washington, more about my childhood. I would have put more of my feelings in it—more of me in it. You only see the sexual part of me in the book. It looks like I'm having a great time. You don't see the sorrow, the pain that I'm going through the other 23 hours a day. I would have liked to let people know it wasn't fun. It was very painful for me. It wasn't something I wanted to do—but something I had to do. •