

Meet the Kennedys Who Are Thinking Bigger Than Politics

With public service behind them (mostly), Patrick and Amy Kennedy are focused on mental health initiatives—whether their family likes it or not.

BY KATE STOREY —◆— SEP 30, 2021



Patrick Kennedy pulls up to the Kennedy Compound in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, in a white golf cart, his three-year-old son Marshall next to him throwing his white-blond hair back in a fit of giggles. If you squint, it almost looks like those old photos of President John F. Kennedy ferrying laughing cousins around the Cape Cod compound in a crowded golf cart. The big white clapboard house where JFK grew up sits unchanged on Nantucket Sound. Patrick, nephew of JFK and son of Senator Ted Kennedy, and his wife Amy are spending the month of August with their five kids in the garage they converted into a summer home at the back of the property.



President John F. Kennedy and his family in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts in August 1962.

AMERICAN PHOTO ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Patrick is coming from the gym. Every day he does a 12-step addiction recovery program, sometimes twice a day. He also does therapy—these days, virtually. He goes to bed early. He's got his routine. And he knows he's in a good place when he's sticking to it. He's more than 10 years sober. And it's been six years since he laid bare his addiction and experience with bipolar disorder in [his 2015 book, *A Common Struggle*](#). In telling his story, he also examined his family's history of mental illness. Today he looks healthy, at peace.

"I just came from working out," Patrick says, settling into a white wicker chair next to Amy. "I was on the bike, and my cousins came up next to me and talked in a way they never would have before, because now they all tell me their mental health issues. I broke the family code of *we don't talk about these things*. That has created an intimacy for me and various members of my family that never existed before, because the only time we related to each other was in the usual chitchat, like all of us do in our lives.

“Wait a second, do you need more kisses?” he says to Marshall, who is squirming in his lap. “I think you need more kisses.”

Patrick, 54, was born a little too late to meet his Uncle Jack, who was killed in 1963, and he was too young to remember his Uncle Bobby, who was killed in 1968. (Recently the family had to deal with the likelihood of parole for Bobby’s murderer, Sirhan Sirhan. Two of Bobby’s children, including Robert Jr., are in favor of parole, while six others as well as his Aunt Ethel **have spoken out** strongly against it.) Patrick’s father, Senator Ted Kennedy, was the last living Kennedy brother, and a driving force in the fight for universal healthcare. The Kennedy way to make change in his father’s generation was to run for office. And that’s what Patrick did too. He served in Congress as a Democratic representative from Rhode Island from 1995 to 2011. And Amy, to whom he’s been married for 10 years, is fresh off her own first run for office. That’s behind them—for now.



The Kennedy family at their compound in Hyannis Port, September 1963.

GIBSON MOSS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

When they look back on their campaigns, they acknowledge what a powerful tool the Kennedy name can be when running for office. “That name recognition is helpful,” Amy says. “The Kennedy name has got really great power, and it just answered a lot of people’s questions before they even had them. They knew I’d value helping people.” But what they’ve also come to realize is how important their own personal stories are in their mission today: mental health advocacy.

“It’s amazing: I wrote the Mental Health Parity Act, was part of all this great policy-making,” Patrick says about the bill he co-authored in 1996, which requires equal insurance coverage of treatment for mental illness and addiction. “But all people want to hear is me say, ‘I’m a drug addict and alcoholic, and I grew up in an alcoholic home and treatment can work.’”



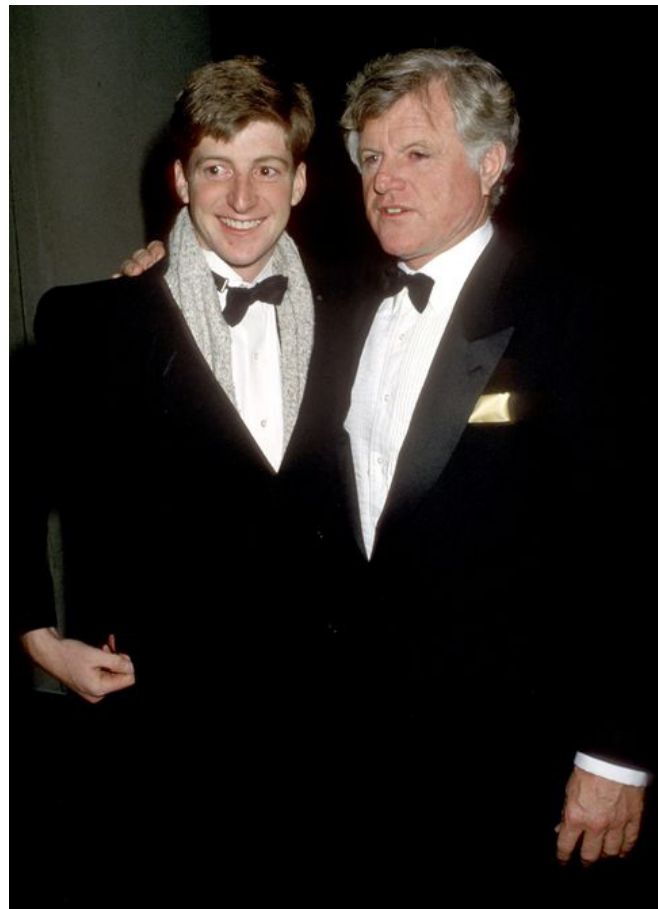
Amy and Patrick Kennedy and their family attend the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Hosts Ripple of Hope Gala in New York City, December 2019.

BENNETT RAGLINGETTY IMAGES

Patrick first went into rehab when he was 18. He was in high school and using cocaine and Xanax—an attempt to self-medicate for depression and bipolar disorder. He checked into the facility as “Patrick K.,” knowing the press attention his last name would draw; he had seen what happened to his mother Joan, whose struggles with addiction were a constant subject of media attention when he was growing up. He stayed in the facility for 10 days. It would be the first of multiple attempts to get sober—always signing in under a different name to mask his identity. It was his greatest fear to have his problems become public—and to disappoint his father. But it all came crashing down in 1991, when Patrick’s apartment roommate at that first rehab facility sold his story, for what Patrick says was \$10,000, to the National Enquirer.

By the time the story came out, Patrick was a 24-year-old state representative in Rhode Island. It was, he was certain, the worst thing that could ever happen to him. But it would become the defining moment in his political career, shifting his political focus to mental health and addiction. “My whole life has changed because instead of trying to keep it secret, I had a chance to break that down because it was broken down for me,” he says. “Because I had the last name, and people felt they could ‘capitalize’ doing that kind of story.”

But while Patrick was pushing forward legislation that would require that mental illness be treated like physical illness, he was still secretly battling his own addictions, signing into rehab facilities under different names when the need arose. It would be nearly two more decades before he got sober, and longer before he told the whole story, the one that included his family’s history with addiction and mental illness. In his book



Ted Kennedy and his son Patrick Kennedy during 10th Annual Kennedy Center Honors, December 1987.

RON GALELLA, LTD. GETTY IMAGES

Patrick talks about his parents' dependency on alcohol, speculating that his father suffered from PTSD after living through the violent deaths of four of his siblings.

As Patrick points out that many of the family stories he recounts in his book, such as his parents' drinking, had been public for years—written about in magazines and books. But his family spoke out against his memoir, his older brother Ted Kennedy Jr. releasing a statement saying, in part, “I am heartbroken that Patrick has chosen to write what is an inaccurate and unfair portrayal of our family. My brother’s recollections of family events and particularly our parents are quite different from my own.”

When we talk about the period following the book's release, Patrick looks down. His family's reaction was hard. “I felt like a traitor,” he says. “The thing I learned in my recovery journey is I can only be responsible for my own piece of this. If it did hurt people, I've made amends. That wasn't my intention. But I'm not regretting the decision to do the book.”



Patrick Kennedy discusses his book *A Common Struggle: A Personal Journey Through the Past and Future of Mental Illness and Addiction* in Coral Gables, Florida, November 2015.

JOHNNY LOUISGETTY IMAGES

Sitting in a studio in Chicago, waiting to go on air during his whirlwind book tour in 2015, he realized it was all worth it. A person working backstage came into his greenroom to say, “When you did your 60 Minutes interview, my whole family watched, and it was the first time we ever discussed mental health in our own family. My whole family watched because they loved your uncles and your family.”

“The reason I told my story is that part of fighting the stigma is not being consumed by the stigma,” he says. “So how can I be fighting for mental health over here and keeping it under wraps over there because I’m worried about this same judgment?”

“What! Are! You! Talking about!” Marshall asks as he jumps on a couch near us. He’s been as patient as a three-year-old can possibly be for the last hour, as we’ve talked about things way over his head. But now he’s had quite enough. “Daddy!” Amy tells him. “We’re talking about Daddy and our family.”



Harper Petitgout, Patrick Kennedy, and Owen Kennedy at a 2015 book signing.

JOHNNY LOUISGETTY IMAGES

advocacy, and as she and Patrick grew their family, she stepped away from teaching. But she had never considered going into politics herself. Not until she saw her local representative switch from being a Democrat to a Republican and pledge his “undying support” to Donald Trump.

“It was definitely reactive to run, based on what was happening at that moment,” she says. “It was a terrible time to run for office, or to think about getting involved in politics, just because there was so much vitriol, and having young kids, but I also felt like if I wasn’t willing to do it, if people watching aren’t willing to get involved, then how will it be different?”

While Patrick has that signature New England Kennedy drawl, Amy sounds distinctly New Jersey. Her family goes back four generations in southern New Jersey, and now Patrick and Amy live with their five children in Brigantine, one town over from Atlantic City, close to the beach. Patrick and Amy met at a Special Olympics fundraiser in Atlantic City in 2010, just after his father’s death. Amy, who was then a middle school history teacher, went to the dinner as a last-minute replacement for her dad, a local politician who was home with a cold. As Amy became more involved in mental health

As we talk about Amy's run for office—she lost to the incumbent in a tight race—Patrick shifts to the front of his seat, becoming animated talking about the support she got from the teachers unions, and her win over “the party machine” in the primary. They're watching the weather, because tomorrow they're hosting a party at Patrick's cousin Chris Kennedy's house down the street to thank Amy's supporters.

“I broke the family code of we don't talk about these things.”

“I just want to say, I think she ran a fantastic race,” he says. “I think she's in a position to jump in somewhere down the line, because she stood up when it needed to happen, when people needed to stand up. And I don't think anyone will ever forget that.”

I ask Amy, “Will you run again?” She looks at Patrick with an eyebrow raised behind her sunglasses.

“Not right now,” she says. “I don't know about someday, but not right now... I feel really like we're running a campaign of another kind right now by focusing on mental health and youth mental health. And that there's urgency around this. This is a crisis, and it requires that type of campaign and energy and a movement to move it forward. So I'm really focused on this. And in the same way, I felt like that election was about the future for South Jersey and the country and my own family. I feel like this is, too. It's my future for my own five kids. It's the future for our country.”

Amy works with Patrick at the Kennedy Forum, the mental health foundation he started. She serves as the education director, focusing on mental health for school age children, a topic that has never been more important, as children across the country, most of whom are too young to get vaccinated, are starting school a year and a half into the pandemic.



Amy Kennedy, Patrick Kennedy, and Harper Petitgout attend the Senate Chamber Dedication Ceremony at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate in Boston, March 2015.

PAUL MAROTTAGETTY IMAGES

Patrick and Amy have fared better than many during the pandemic—their five children have had each other for entertainment, and they’ve managed to stay busy playing outside at the beach. Patrick has been home much more than usual, which

“I’m striving for today to stay mentally healthy, because nothing speaks louder than action.”

means his children have seen what he does all day, including his morning recovery meetings. He told their 13-year-old, Amy’s daughter from a previous marriage, that he is in recovery two years ago.

“I told her at the appropriate time, and when it could be instructive to her about my being disciplined and having good habits, all of

what I’m striving for today to stay mentally healthy,” he says. “Because nothing speaks louder than action.”

During the pandemic they've taken advantage of tele-mental health for their children, as well. But for many families without the resources they have, the last 18 months have been crushing—with an increase in anxiety and depression across the population—and getting help can be complicated, expensive, and confusing.

Patrick and Amy list all the things we should have been doing—and that they've fought for—to prepare for the Covid-19 mental health crisis. For one, health check screenings at mass vaccination facilities; in letters to President Joe Biden and Massachusetts governor Charles Baker, they proposed using the 15 minutes we waited after getting the shot to be used to screen for depression, anxiety, and trauma. At the very least, people could have been given a list of phone numbers and information about mental health resources. They were unsuccessful.



Keri Shahidi, Amy Kennedy, and Yara Shahidi at the Town & Country Philanthropy Summit, May 2019.

BRYAN BEDDERGETTY IMAGES

“We missed an opportunity, in the public health perspective, of bringing the two together,” Patrick says. “The biggest problem with mental health is it’s been cast out... The original sin is it’s been cast out of the house of medicine. And the challenge today is to bring it back in and integrate it.”

He describes mental health advocacy as “anemic”—something he and Amy are hoping to change. And opening up about their own lives is a part of that.

Patrick looks down at the phone in his lap to check the time. It’s time to pick up the older kids at tennis, so he hops back in the golf cart while Amy gives me the tour of the house. The Kennedy compound’s rich past is woven through their home. There’s



Ted Kennedy and son Patrick Kennedy in Brockport, New York, 1979.

RON GALELLAGETTY IMAGES

a bucket from Patrick’s father’s sailboat, the Mya, up on a shelf. Above the couch, photos of Patrick with the senator sailing make up a gallery wall, along with Patrick and Amy out on the water with their kids.

At the end of Ted Kennedy’s life, in 2008, Patrick and his father were in the Oval Office while his father signed the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act—on the same desk where his brother, JFK, had signed the Community Mental Health

Act. The senator put his arm around his youngest son and said, “Keep going. You’re doing good things.”

“For him, that was the most he could broach the subject, and it was more as a politician—‘This is a big issue’—rather than any interpersonal acknowledgement that you want,” Patrick says. “But it was good enough, because you’ve got to take people where they are.”

KATE STOREY *Esquire* **Writer-at-Large**

Kate Storey is a Writer-at-Large for *Esquire* covering culture, politics, and style.