

Saving the environment concerns Kennedy

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ELMIRA — Robert F. Kennedy Jr. taps his right foot and makes the sign of the cross as the twin-engine plane takes off from Westchester County Airport.

"So how was your trip to Ecuador?" asks David Sullivan, executive director of St. Joseph's Hospital Foundation.

Kennedy launches into a 10-minute answer, explaining how he and an entourage of environmentalists recently toured that Latin American country's rain forests to examine the damage wreaked by U.S. oil companies through exploration and drilling in the area.

He talks of polluted rivers once teeming with fish that fed the natives, who now suffer from malnutrition and disease.

"We saw rivers on fire," he said, adding that in one river, an oil company "spilled more than the Exxon Valdez, and they never cleaned it up."

Kennedy wastes few words on casual conversation, conveying his passion for environmentalism, as the plane makes its way to Elmira where he is scheduled to give a speech at Notre Dame High School this Monday night, Sept. 10.

Proceeds from the speech — with tickets at \$30 for adults and \$15 for students and senior citizens — will be split evenly between the hospital foundation and the school.

Sullivan earlier noted that the hospital is taking some of Kennedy's environmental ardor to heart. "Right now, we're in the midst of examining an entire hospital recycling program," he said, adding that St. Joseph's will start the project by restructuring its use of paper products.

That type of responsibility is not the hallmark of U.S. oil companies in Ecuador, Kennedy emphasizes, pointing out that within the United States, petroleum firms are forced by government regulation to properly dispose of oil-well wastes.

"In that country, Ecuador, there are no rules," he says. "(The oil companies) take (waste) and dump it into the nearest streams ..."

"I think most Americans feel that when American companies go abroad, they should bring American values with them," he continues. "In this case, I don't think they did."

Fighting for environmental values is a full-time job for the 36-year-old son of the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. A law professor at Pace University, he supervises the school's environmental litigation clinic and has made a name for himself by tackling polluters — potential and current — in the courtrooms of the state.

Kennedy also serves as senior staff attorney for the Hudson River Fishermen's Association and as project attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, the environmental organization that sponsored his recent excursion to Ecuador.

But the title he holds that tells the most about the origins of his environmentalist ethos is that of president of the New York State Falconer's Association. In 1987, the state conservation department published a falconer's manual written by Kennedy.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was in Elmira Sept. 10 to speak on the environment.

Given the popular association of the Kennedy family with Camelot, it is interesting to note that a novel retelling the King Arthur legend — T. H. White's *The Sword and the Stone* — was the inspiration for Kennedy's interest in falconry.

"(The book) had a whole chapter on falconry," Kennedy says. "When I read that, I was sold on it. I got a hawk after that, and I've been training them all my life."

Preserving the habitat of the falcon and other animals has grown for Kennedy from a youthful interest in animals to what appears to be lifetime pursuit. Kennedy dismisses questions about political aspirations.

"I enjoy what I'm doing right now," he says. "I live one day at a time." But he acknowledges that the question is perennial. "That's part of growing up with my name."

The Kennedy name helped to draw more than 700 people to fill the Notre Dame auditorium Monday night. Yet one Elmiran who met the speaker as a boy says he might not make it to Notre Dame until the reception afterward. Still, he hopes to meet the son of his former boss.

"In the '60s, I did some advance work for Robert Kennedy around the country," recalls William R. DeLaney, an Elmira attorney and parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes.

"There came a time — I'm not sure of what year — I advanced a trip to Nashville, Tenn.," he says. "I believe March of '66."

At that time the senior Kennedy had yet to announce his candidacy for the presidency. "He had made a lot of trips in 1966 in support of congressional candidates around the country," DeLaney says.

And on the trip to Nashville, Kennedy had brought along his young son Robert. When the boy's mother called to remind her husband of his religious duty to his son, DeLaney was enlisted to find a Catholic church in Nashville.

"The reason we went to Mass was it was some particular feast day that his mother told his father to get (Robert Jr.) to Mass. That's what I remember," DeLaney said.

DeLaney notes that he eventually went on to become a Kennedy delegate at the Democratic convention in 1968, winning the right to represent the Elmira area against Hubert Humphrey's and Eugene McCarthy's delegates a week after Kennedy had been assassinated.

A little more than two hours after landing in Elmira, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. opens his speech by observing that when it comes to the environment, "there are no Democratic children and Republican children."

After noting the growing rate of species extinction around the planet — a situation aggravated by the human destruction of wildlife habitats — Kennedy turns to the topic of global warming.

He informs his audience that global warming, caused by the atmospheric trapping of heat rising from the earth's surface, has increased greatly because of excess carbon gases produced by human activity. Scientists estimate that the average temperature of the earth may rise five-eight

degrees during the next 60-100 years, he notes.

"The last time that the average temperature was five degrees less than it is today, there was a mile and a half of packed ice over this area," he remarks, alluding to prehistoric glacial activity in North America. He then notes that when the average temperature was five degrees higher than the current norm, dinosaurs and giant reptiles roamed the earth.

Kennedy paints these imaginative scenarios so his audience will realize that the effects of global warming are "unpredictable."

"The good news about global warming is that we can do something about it," he tells the crowd. "We have energy-efficient technology." Yet using such technology will "take a massive shift" in the ways U.S. citizens consume energy, Kennedy says, asserting that this country must take the lead in producing energy efficient technology because the United States is the biggest consumer of world goods.

Changing the nation's attitude toward energy consumption will require a great commitment on the part of people, he acknowledges, but such commitment is not unknown in U.S. history. Kennedy reminds the audience that slavery, like wasteful energy consumption, was once a socially acceptable system.

"At one point, slavery was universally condoned and accepted. In another generation, slavery was condemned," he says.

The environmental attorney points to efforts to protect the Hudson River from potential developers and polluters as proof that a concerted effort on behalf of the environment can succeed.

Many Hudson River fish would have been destroyed, for example, were it not for the 1965 court battle environmentalists waged against the proposed construction of a Con Edison reservoir on Storm King Mountain, Kennedy says. The case set a monumental precedent for environmental law, he adds.

"When environmentalists went to court prior to Storm King and they wanted to protect a reserve they didn't own, they would get thrown out of court," he says, explaining that now, non-owners of threatened lands and bodies of water can sue to preserve them, whereas before one had to have an economic interest in the area to do so.

Kennedy wraps up his speech by calling the Hudson River the "Noah's Ark," of the environmental movement, since its estuaries still teem with life while other rivers — left unprotected by their neighboring communities — have died from pollution.

After reminding the audience that this country's wilderness was the inspiration for artists and politicians who threw off the

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