

One-on-One with the Governor of the State of Florida: Charlie Crist

Contributed by Jimmy Pitenis

When

Charlie Crist was young, he went to Riviera Junior High School in St. Petersburg, Florida and later attended Florida State University.

Governor Crist attended Law School in Alabama.

His grandfather, who was a Greek Cypriot immigrant, shined shoes for a living and Charlie with hard work became the Governor of Florida.

My

mom and I felt welcomed at the State Capital in Tallahassee, Florida. We were offered drinks while waiting for the governor to arrive. A short five minutes later, the Governor arrived and introduced himself. He shook my hand and said, "Hi! I'm Charlie Crist. You can call me Charlie." He welcomed us into his large office and we chatted a while before the interview began. I found him to be friendly and honest. He even asked me questions about my school and my hobbies.

Charlie

Crist is loved here in Florida because he has lowered property taxes and he has helped many hurricane victims. Even though some have lost their houses due to storms, they haven't lost their spirit. He is known as the People's Governor because he travels around Florida and visits areas that have been hit by hurricanes. He helps the victims and tries to improve their lives.

The

Interview with Governor Crist:

1) What is your favorite part of being the Governor of Florida?

My favorite part about being the Governor of Florida is the opportunity to help people. I still can't believe that I'm the Governor! It's such a privilege. It's not something that I ever thought about — the opportunity to help people out. I went to public school here in Florida and I'm a graduate of our State University system. I went to Florida State University here in Tallahassee and it is very important for me to continue making improvements in education, as well as make Florida safer and advance the overall quality of life for our fellow citizens. There are almost 20 million of us and it is very exciting for me to have the privilege to serve the people of Florida. I try to serve with a servant's heart.

2) How did your parents influence your life?

My mother and father were and continue to be an enormous influence on me. I, like you, have three sisters and my mom and dad were a huge influence on all four of us. My mother is the sweetest woman that I've ever met and my father is the smartest man that I've ever met. So, it was a wonderful upbringing, to have parents that loved us as much as they did growing up. Indeed, their influence was enormously impactful and very positive. You know, they always strived to teach us to do what's right, be kind to others and very important things like that.

3) Who inspired you to get into politics?

Probably my father. Not directly, but indirectly. He's a family doctor in St. Petersburg, Florida my home-town. Also, my dad was on the school board when I was a kid and I was helping him out with his campaign. I remember when I was nine years old, I used to campaign for my dad. I, still, remember going to fish fries and things like that down in St. Petersburg handing out his card. After that experience, I enjoyed it very much — the interaction with people. I love people and having that experience, I decided to get involved in student government. I was involved with it in junior high school and high school, college and law school. I guess, it was a natural progression and my father really inspired me. He actually tried to discourage me for politics. He knew I wouldn't become a rich man as long as I was honest in politics, which fortunately I am. He thought I could do better financially in other fields, but this is what I love and money has never been a driving factor.

4) What sports did you play in school?

I played a little bit of basketball and volleyball in middle school (junior high school they called it then) and then I played football in high school. Two years in college, I played football as a quarter back and it taught me a lot about this business called politics. Politics it's very competitive just like sports are. You have to be in shape for the season and the same applies when it is a campaign year. Perhaps, it's all about teamwork the same way athletics is. I can't do anything worthwhile alone. I have to have a great team of people that are pulling together to help Florida and I've been blessed by the fact that we have that in Florida right now.

5) What type of summer jobs did you have while you were in high school and university?

I worked at a construction job as just a laborer at a construction site the summer before I went to college. I worked at selling bicycles. Actually, my first job was selling bicycles, I have a story about that I hope it won't bore you. It was just a part-time job in my junior year in high school kind of an over Christmas holiday job. I'll never forget the first paycheck I got after the first week of part-time work. The paycheck was for \$17.76 in 1976 and I still have the stub today. I saved it, because I thought what the odds are of something like that. I guess, I am very patriotic and it had an impact on me. Let's see; I worked in construction, I sold bicycles and I worked at a men's department store called Maas Brothers. Maas Brothers was a big department store here in Florida years ago. What else did I do? I worked as a life guard for a couple of summers while in college. I guess that's about it.

6) Do you have any brothers or sisters and are they involved in politics?

Well, like I said, I have three sisters and my older sister Margaret was a school teacher. All of my three sisters have been involved in my campaigns. I am grateful for that and I love them very much. You know, family is always helpful and a great support. My next younger sister, Elizabeth, she's a doctor in California and she lives in Laguna Beach, California. My younger sister, Kathy, she is a school teacher just like Margaret was a public school teacher, however now she's an administrator at St. Pete college. I'm very proud of my mom and dad and all three of them. They've been helpful in my campaigns and always continue to be great advisors to me.

7) Where would you like to see Florida ranked in regards to education in comparison to other states? What has to happen to achieve that goal?

Well,

I'd like to see Florida ranked as high as possible. I believe, it's important for all of us to bear in mind, it's not just the amount of money you spend per student that will determine how well we do for our students. I don't want to place an over emphasis on the FCAT (Florida's standardized testing) and I feel, maybe, there's been a little bit of that. I think it is important taking a measure of what happens in the classroom in a reasonable way. So, I want to have the testing that we have in our schools to be applied in a fair and reasonable way. I can assure you we're working on that. At the same time, I want to make sure that we pay our teachers as much as we can. They work incredibly hard. They are virtually the second parent after your mother and father. They have an enormous responsibility and opportunity to do so much for young people, our pupils. So, I want to make sure, they are compensated very well in fact as well as possible. I want us [Florida] to be ranked the very highest we can. Indeed, we can continue to improve towards this direction. If I am not mistaken, the latest ranking in achievement that we had put us on the top ten in the country and that's a good result. There are other rankings that vary and usually they are those people that are critical. They talk about we're 49th in this or that. However, what matters to me is that our students are learning and that they're learning in a safe environment. The tax payers are getting their money's worth and we provide the very best care for Florida's children.

8) Would you like to be President of the United States some day? Why or why not?

I'm

very happy to be the Governor of Florida and who knows what the future holds. After this is done, I have no idea. But I can tell you this "I love public service and as long as I can continue to serve the people, if they're willing to let me, I would like to do that. So, I don't know what the future holds but I'm honored to be the Governor of Florida."

9) How can young people help you achieve your goals for the State of Florida?

Well

my goals for the young people of Florida are to live their dreams. The way to do that is to take school seriously; to study hard, study their books, listen to mom and dad and be very good. It's pretty simple. I mean, it's not a complicated recipe in order to achieve success. I know, it's challenging along the way and there are times when it's not so easy to do what's right. If children are well motivated to do what's right such as; study their lessons, to be polite to their teachers and fellow students, listen to mom and dad usually things turn out pretty good.

10) What role will Florida play in this year's presidential election? Do you think it will be as close as it was in 2000?

That's

a great question, Jimmy. I think, Florida, will play a significant role as we have seen in recent elections in 2000 and again in 2004. The same, I think, we will see again in 2008. This year's election will be a historic election by any measure. They have an African-American candidate on the Democratic ticket for President, which is clearly historic. In addition, to have a woman candidate for Vice-President on the Republican ticket, it's historic for the Republicans since the Democrats have done that before. So, regardless of the outcome, we will have a historic election either by electing the first female Vice President or the first African American President. So, I think, Florida's role in this election will be pivotal. We are the fourth largest state in the country and we have 27 electoral votes. That's a lot. So, whoever takes Florida will certainly help them to getting to the White House.

11) And
will it be as close as it was in 2000?

I
hope not, I hope there's a little bit of spread. Those close races get you into challenges, court hearings and all that stuff we saw back in 2000. I'd rather see Florida be spared of that this year.

Before we left, he
asked, if I played any sports and I told him I play golf. I invited him for a round of golf with me at the LPGA near my home in Daytona Beach, anytime he has the chance. I had a wonderful experience visiting the Governor. I hope he can play golf with me someday!