

The Trip to Normal

By Lindsey Toomer

On Oct. 11, 2020, Gisele Barreto Fetterman went to her local grocery store in Forrest Hills, Pennsylvania, unaccompanied by her usual Pennsylvania State Police security detail.

Being recognized is nothing new to Fetterman, who has been the second lady of Pennsylvania (or SLOP, as she prefers) since January 2019. She's also the former first lady of Braddock, Pennsylvania, located just outside of Pittsburgh, where her husband was mayor for 14 years.

Every once in a while, she will take a quick trip without her security just so she can "feel normal."

"If I'm running to Aldi to get three things, I just want to go by myself and be a normal person," Fetterman said in a recent interview.

On this trip, though, she was approached by someone who recognized her as someone who talks openly about her former status as an undocumented immigrant.

While Fetterman was in line to check out, a woman approached and started yelling racial slurs, telling her she doesn't belong in the United States.

The woman continued her verbal attack as Fetterman walked to her car. At that point, Fetterman pulled out her phone and captured the woman pulling down her mask and calling her the n-word.

Fetterman, a 38-year-old Brazilian immigrant, said the incident left her crying, but she said she wanted to share the video on social media as a teaching opportunity.

"I wanted her to see herself and not like what she saw, and I wanted her neighbors, her family members to see that too," Fetterman said.

The attack made headlines and drew considerable social media attention.

Fetterman and her husband, Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman, said they try to be compassionate, even in intolerant incidents such as this.

“She’s obviously had a lot of hardship or challenges in her life, and that doesn’t excuse what she did,” John Fetterman said of the woman who confronted his wife. “But you don’t see a lot of happy, healthy, well-adjusted people randomly yelling those kinds of things at someone in a parking lot.”

While her husband has become a recognizable, rising star in Democratic politics — John Fetterman is now campaigning for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 2022 — Gisele Fetterman has become a familiar face and a formidable contributor to the state in her own right.

She has founded and helps to run nonprofits in and around Pittsburgh that provide everything from free food and clothing for families in need to yoga clinics for people suffering from trauma.

In 2019, she and her husband spurned the idea of moving into the sprawling lieutenant governor’s mansion at Fort Indiantown Gap northeast of Harrisburg and instead designated the home for public programs and events, such as swim classes and camps for children — all of which Gisele manages.

Gisele Fetterman has become one of the most — if not the most — well-known spouses of a Pennsylvania politician in recent memory, not only because of her charitable work but because of her exuberance and presence on social media and in her community.

“Historically, no one has ever really known who the second lady was, so I tried to really recreate this role into something positive with a little bit of a platform,” Fetterman said.

Given her former undocumented status, a young Gisele Barreto de Almeida never would have imagined she would be in a position with the platform she has today.

Her mother, Ester Resende, moved with Gisele and her older brother, Del Almeida, from Rio de Janeiro to the U.S. when Gisele was 7 years old to escape street violence. Resende gave up her job running the nutrition departments in several Rio de Janeiro hospitals to be a domestic worker in Queens, New York.

Fetterman said because her family was well off in Brazil, they were robbed multiple times. She remembers her mother getting stitches after someone stole a necklace right off the back of her neck.

Additionally, she had a cousin who was carjacked on his way to work — and despite surrendering, her cousin was shot and remains disabled today.

Her mother feared for her family's safety and decided to pack everything and leave for the U.S. in hope of a better future.

Fetterman said she remembers arriving in New York and immediately feeling the cold on her nose, having only experienced the warm weather of Rio de Janeiro.

In the early '90s, Fetterman would go out with her mother and older brother on bulk garbage day in search of new furniture for their one-bedroom apartment located above a doctor's office in Queens.

"You could tell everything belonged somewhere else," Fetterman said, recalling comments from a friend who visited their apartment and complimented the family's "eclectic taste."

The family also dumpster-dived for food and other necessities. Fetterman remembers one time she "hit a jackpot of Chunky bars."

Because they were undocumented, Fetterman's mother would tell her to "be invisible" every day.

"I didn't draw attention to myself in any way," Fetterman said.

The family eventually moved from Queens to Harrison, New Jersey, where Fetterman and her brother attended Harrison High School.

She said she and her brother were never allowed to participate in school sports because of the risk of injury — undocumented also meant uninsured. She would also only work jobs in which employers did not question her citizenship status, and she was never able to apply for internships to prepare for a career.

There were a few close calls, though, and each time Fetterman feared it was the end and would lead her family to be deported.

One day, Fetterman stayed home sick from school and saw her school principal outside her apartment window. The family never answered the door, and she teared up remembering the fear she felt.

To this day, Fetterman still doesn't know why her principal came to her home.

Only close friends and occasionally a teacher she grew close to knew of her undocumented status.

Fetterman said because her life was restricted for so long, she now values her freedom so much more. She got her green card in 2004 and became a U.S. citizen in 2009.

Fetterman's mother, who now lives about five minutes from Fetterman in North Braddock, was also able to obtain citizenship herself after 31 years in the U.S.

Resende, in a recent interview, teared up remembering her first time voting in the 2020 election.

“It was the most wonderful thing in my life,” she said. “Really, I thought that my heart was jumping out of my mouth.”

Fetterman’s brother also recently obtained his documentation and now works as an artist in New Jersey.

Vivian Valim Vaz has been close friends with Fetterman since she came to the U.S. from Brazil in 2004.

Vaz said she admires how Fetterman stands up for what she believes in and fights for what she thinks is right.

“I don’t think she would be in her position right now, trying to advocate for the people that have no papers, if she wasn’t one of the people that went through the process that she did,” Vaz said. “It’s a free country, but you’re not really free when you don’t have documentation here.”

After high school, Fetterman attended Kean University in Union, New Jersey, where she pursued a degree in math. When she was close to finishing, she realized math was not her passion, so she transferred to the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York.

Fetterman said she never pursued a full-time career in nutrition and instead took jobs in finance and consulting. At the same time, she was developing her knack for charity and helping others.

After a family in Newark died in a house fire, Fetterman worked to collect smoke detectors to distribute. She often volunteered with Habitat for Humanity in Newark as well as with a group helping newborn babies going through drug withdrawal.

Today, Fetterman showcases her compassion for others with two nonprofits, For Good PGH and the Free Store 15104 in Braddock, both located right down the street from her home on Braddock Avenue. Given her background in nutrition, Fetterman said she wants to improve food access and equality.

The Free Store accepts donations not only from local people but also from grocery stores and distributors. Fetterman often shares photos on social media of food that was destined originally to end up in a landfill before being sent to the Free Store — which she calls “food rescues.”

Operating out of an RV-sized container formerly used for overseas shipments, the Free Store was inspired by Fetterman's days of dumpster-diving.

“Coming from a Third World country, I found myself in this country of disposability,” Fetterman said. “Waste bothers me. I wanted the value in these things.”

Every Tuesday and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon, community members drop off unwanted items – clothes, coats, shoes, diapers, toiletries and all kinds of food, from bread to fruits and vegetables, even toys and puzzles.

At the same time, those who need them can cycle in and out, taking what they need. Fetterman works alongside about a dozen volunteers to run the store.

Because of coronavirus, the Free Store shut down for two months last spring, but since reopening the day after Memorial Day, the store has incorporated pandemic protocols, including limiting capacity, enforcing social distancing and requiring masks.

Fetterman was [recently interviewed by Fredricka Whitfield on CNN](#) about the Free Store.

Marcy Gans has been shopping at the Free Store since she became unemployed last January because of an injury requiring surgery. She said the Free Store has been her sole food source, and she's "not ashamed to say it."

Gans was a home health care worker prior to her injury and has since been collecting unemployment. It takes her about 40 minutes to walk from her home to the Free Store.

"If it wasn't for the free stuff that they're giving out, I'd be [out of luck] this winter, seriously. And I'm a 61-year-old resident, worked all my life, I own a home out here." Gans said.

As Gans walked away from the store on a Saturday in mid-November, she jokingly talked about her biggest worry — that Fetterman might not be around at some point because of her husband's political career.

"We're going to lose them!" she yelled toward Gisele Fetterman. "They're grooming him for Washington!"

This was before John Fetterman announced he would run for Senate.

"I went to council meetings, I watched him, and he's real. He's got my vote and my endorsement," Gans said. "And then I met his wife, I read her bios, I watched her. She's real. They're not fake. Their children are beautiful. They're down to earth, and I love it."

Alicia Anton has volunteered at the Free Store for the past four years. She described Gisele Fetterman as a model for what every human should aspire to be.

"Even if someone frustrates you, you treat them with kindness. I try to channel her more and more, but it doesn't always work," Anton said, laughing.

"She can so nicely convince you to do anything you don't want to do. And you don't even know she convinced you — I feel like she Jedi-mind tricked me," Anton said. "She is way nicer than you and I will ever be."

For Good PGH serves as an “umbrella organization” for all Fetterman’s charity and advocacy work. The nonprofit has provided dozens of services besides the Free Store, such as yoga lessons for trauma victims, painted suitcases for kids in foster care, and a knitting group for women who live in a local halfway house.

Kristen Michaels, For Good PGH’s co-founder and co-director, reached out to Fetterman because she wanted to open her own version of the Free Store in Wilkinsburg, another suburb of Pittsburgh, a few miles north of Braddock.

After doing just that, the pair grew closer and launched For Good PGH with a project called “Hello Hijab” in spring 2017, creating Barbie-compatible hijabs to show kids that adding a piece of fabric doesn’t change their dolls. The project garnered praise and mentions on [CNN](#) and in [The Huffington Post](#).

The Hollander building, located at 910 Braddock Ave., is For Good’s hub. The nonprofit also provides office space in the building for aspiring female entrepreneurs.

Michaels said she and Fetterman work well together because Michaels can see the step-by-step process needed to make Fetterman’s visionary ideas happen.

“Her brain just works differently than most people’s, and it’s why she’s able to do so much,” Michaels said. “She’s focused on the end goal, and she doesn’t get stuck in the worry and the details that get a lot of us stuck.”

Fetterman said she loves her work because it allows her to be “as mushy and soft and vulnerable” as she really is. Despite her husband’s profession, she said she has no interest in working in politics, because “politics is mean.”

“It took me a long time to accept that my gentleness is OK, and I can be effective in my own way,” Fetterman said. “If I can continue to take situations and pour love into them and change perspectives, then that’s what I want to do for as long as I can.”

Braddock, a once-thriving steel town, had a population of 20,000 in the 1920s. It has just over 2,000 today. The Mon Valley Works Edgar Thomson Plant is still in operation, but it has far fewer workers than it did in its prime.

The town consists of one main street, Braddock Avenue, with dozens of abandoned store fronts and buildings — some of which have been restored by the Fettermans.

John Fetterman, who has a master’s degree in public policy from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, grew up in York, Pennsylvania, in the southcentral part of the state. He ended up in the Pittsburgh area as part of AmeriCorps, working with young people who were seeking their GEDs.

Fetterman was elected mayor in 2005, winning by just one vote. He was re-elected two times and held the position until he became lieutenant governor in 2019.

In 2007, Gisele Fetterman was reading a magazine that featured an article about Braddock and then-Mayor John Fetterman’s attempts to revive the town. The article noted that parts of the Brooklyn Bridge, which New Yorker Gisele knew well, were made in Braddock.

She wrote a letter, expressing interest in visiting and learning more about Braddock and how she might help the mayor.

It turns out the mayor ended up with the letter and invited Gisele to make the trip.

He showed her the town, and before long, the two were traveling back and forth between Braddock and Newark.

“I didn’t meet him and I was like in love, but I met him and I knew he was a good person,” she said. “I knew he was good, and I knew I was going to love the goodness in him.”

The couple eloped after dating for just under a year, and now, 11 years later, they have three children: Karl, 11; Grace, 9; and August, 6.

Between government service and non-profit work, the Fettermans take their jobs seriously. John has led efforts in Pennsylvania to legalize recreational marijuana and reform criminal justice laws, and he was outspoken after the November election in defending against Republican unsubstantiated accusations that the state’s vote-counting was flawed.

But John and Gisele Fetterman are also well-known for their fun sides, particularly on social media.

Photos often tell the tale. Gisele takes pride in her fashion and is always stylishly dressed. John is frequently found in a t-shirt and cargo shorts — in fact, he owns only one suit.

“The joke is that we always look like we’re going to different parties,” Gisele said.

Today, the Fettermans, who live in a converted car dealership in Braddock, are must-follows on Twitter for many — even their rescue dog Levi has a Twitter handle, [@LeviFetterman](#).

The couple is often found poking fun at each other.

A supporter tweeted to [@JohnFetterman](#) and [@giselefetterman](#) that she rejoined the app just because she enjoyed the couple’s public playful bickering. [Gisele’s response?](#) “I’m NOT even mad at him today for anything but I’m going to start a fight just for you.”

Another supporter [tweeted that John](#) could “easily be a video game hero,” compelling Gisele to share a photo of her husband — whom she lovingly calls João, Portuguese for John — as a cowboy at their older son’s first birthday party.

John Fetterman, at 6-foot-8, stands more than a foot taller than his 5-foot-6 wife. When they are photographed together, she's often found posting pictures with John's head cropped out, teasing that showing her full outfit is more important than showing full John.

On Feb. 9, Gisele tweeted a video of her husband and daughter Grace, who was helping him complete a "polar pop challenge" in support of the Special Olympics. Gisele and the boys are heard giggling in the background as Grace pops ice cold water balloons over her father's head — while standing on a step ladder, of course.

<https://twitter.com/giselefetterman/status/1359183246429466637?s=20>

Gisele also shared a screenshot from an interview where John was caught smiling, saying she "didn't even know" he ever smiled. A few weeks later, John shared another photo of himself smiling on Twitter and said, "I don't always smile, but when I do, [Gisele] is right there to drag me."

The couple uses social media to advocate for those they care for, too. Toward the end of January, Ashley Gaines-Cannon, a close friend, died after struggling with an opioid addiction, leaving four children motherless.

The Fettermans shared Gaines-Cannon's story and GoFundMe on their feeds, helping raise over \$10,000 in just one day to support the family. The GoFundMe page has since raised over \$30,000.

Gisele's interest in helping people in need has led her, through For Good, to host training sessions in her home on how to administer Narcan — an opioid reversal treatment. For Good also has a program allowing anyone who needs Narcan to request a delivery by emailing the nonprofit (info@forgoodpgh.org).

While raising a family under the scope of the public eye has its challenges, John Fetterman said that any difficulties his family has “pale in steep comparison to those that are faced by a lot of Pennsylvanian families.”

Gisele said she personally wants no role in politics, but she said her beliefs align perfectly with her husband’s when it comes to issues such as immigration reform, recreational marijuana legalization and LGBTQ rights.

Gisele often speaks out about her own medical marijuana use.

She has chronic back pain and sees a chiropractor weekly, while also making use of an inversion table — a medical contraption that helps someone stretch his or her back.

Doctors have suggested surgery to help the pain, but Gisele said she doesn’t want to risk surgery near her spine.

Instead, she uses topical medical marijuana products as well as a vape for the back pain.

“On the days that the pain is just too much to face the day, it helps me feel a little bit more normal,” Gisele said. “I can’t stop doing things, so the pain can be debilitating where it wants me to stop, and this allows me to keep going.”

Like the rest of the world, Gisele said she is navigating the coronavirus pandemic, attempting to balance motherhood and two nonprofits, with the public eye always watching.

The three young Fettermans know their parents are often in the spotlight, but Gisele said they live normal lives and “aren’t phased.”

“I’m raising them for the world,” she said. “I don’t believe in shielding them from the realities of the world.”

When John Fetterman announced in January he would pursue the Democratic nomination for Senate to replace Republican Pat Toomey, who is retiring, it meant that Gisele and the kids would likely follow on the campaign trail at times.

Gisele said she is used to being a “surrogate” for John, “whether he’s campaigning or just in office.”

For his part, John said he understands and appreciates his wife’s many contributions to himself and the state.

“I can assure you Gisele is every bit as kind and authentic of a person as she comes across as,” he said, “and I think that’s the secret as to why everyone gravitates toward her – because she really is that.

“I joke about it, but it also happens to be true that she’s everybody’s favorite,” John added. “If we ever ended up on the same ballot against each other, she would smoke me.”