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What About Elizabeth Edwards?

By Jocelyn Noveck The Associated Press

There were so many questions to ask about John Edwards on Friday after he admitted the rumors of an affair were true. But the most poignant ones weren't really about him.

What, so many people wondered, about his wife, Elizabeth? The woman who experienced both tragedy and success by his side, who campaigned relentlessly for him, and who's now battling incurable cancer? How was she doing? Had she really known? And if she had, and forgave him, should everyone else do the same?

Diane Helbig, for one, was in no mood to forgive.

"I think it's the meanest thing that could ever have happened to her," said Helbig, 47, a business development coach from Lakewood, Ohio. "Meaner than getting cancer, which is not controllable."

Betrayal on top of illness, she said, was like "adding garbage to garbage. I just don't understand how someone who professes to love somebody can do this."

Edwards acknowledged Friday that he'd had an affair with a former campaign aide, Rielle Hunter, in 2006 and that he'd lied repeatedly about it. In an interview with ABC News, he denied, though, that he was the father of her baby girl, Frances Quinn, although he said he hadn't taken a paternity test. In a statement, he said he told his family about the affair in 2006.

Helbig was doubtful. "Wouldn't you say that to save face?" she asked. "I think she would protect him at all costs — she is a selfless partner."

That Elizabeth Edwards might have known, and for a long while, didn't diminish the admiration Ellen Gerstein, a New York marketing director, feels for her.

"You know what — she's still really bright and I still have a lot of respect for her," said Gerstein, 40, of Ardsley, N.Y. — though she added that sticking by her husband under those circumstances was "not a choice I would be making."

Gerstein had met Elizabeth Edwards, who is 59, after a speech the candidate's wife made last year at a bloggers' conference. "She was smart, witty and charming," said Gerstein. "My heart goes out to her. She shouldn't have to deal with this, after all she has been through, from the loss of her son, Wade, to her brave battle against cancer." Wade Edwards was killed at age 16 in a car accident in 1996.

A few of those interviewed felt they — and we — shouldn't judge the actions of either husband or wife, because their personal life was just that: personal.

"I don't think it's anyone else's business what's going on in their marriage," said Joanna Coles, editor in chief of *Marie Claire*, the women's magazine. "I feel for Elizabeth Edwards, and I also feel that she's the only person allowed to make any judgment in this situation."

If she had forgiven her husband and moved on, Coles added, that would also be her own business — and not, incidentally, an unusual response. "Sometimes, affairs make a marriage stronger," Coles said. "Just because there has been an affair doesn't mean you don't have a strong marriage."

Psychiatrist Gail Saltz, who has counseled many couples through infidelity, concurred. "Marriages survive infidelity when both decide to repair and forgive," said Saltz. "The biggest sufferer will be that child."

Carla Young, 25, felt that while the Edwardses were entitled to their privacy, no matter how they've decide to handle this, she could not countenance the dishonesty she felt Edwards displayed in his persistent lying.

"OK, tell reporters it's none of their business, but don't lie," said Young, who works in accounting at the University of Texas. "Is he lying about the baby being his as well?"

Along with the sympathy for Elizabeth Edwards came equally ardent sympathy for her three children — Cate, 26, Emma Claire, 10, and Jack, 8.

"This informs what Cate will know about relationships with men," said Helbig, the Ohio business coach. "It informs how she will deal with her own relationships with men."

And Louis Columbus, who works in business development in Orange, Calif., was stunned that Edwards didn't look ahead to the potential impact on his children.

"This is a smart guy, an attorney," he said. "What amazes me is that he doesn't see how this action is going to reverberate not only through his marriage. Now it's going to touch his kids forever."

Edwards timeline

1977

The Edwardses marry.

1996

April 4: Wade Edwards, 16, dies on the way to the family beach home, when a gust of wind sweeps his Jeep off the highway.

2004

Nov. 3: Elizabeth Edwards is diagnosed with breast cancer the day her husband and Sen. John Kerry concede the presidential race.

2005

March: The family says Elizabeth Edwards is making progress in her treatment for breast

cancer. She has surgery to remove a cancerous growth following four months of chemotherapy to shrink the half-dollar-size mass. A family spokeswoman says Elizabeth will undergo five to six weeks of radiation treatment starting in early April.

2006

July 5: Edwards' political action committee begins to make payments to a newly formed firm run by Rielle Hunter to produce videos for what will be his presidential campaign. The committee paid \$100,000 in a four-month span. **Dec. 27:** Edwards tells supporters of his intentions to run for president in an e-mail, a day before his formal announcement in New Orleans.

2007

April 1 : Edwards' political action committee makes its last payment to Hunter's company.

April 4: Elizabeth Edwards tells The Associated Press that she has a type of cancer that is more likely to be controlled by anti-estrogen drugs.

March 22: Edwards and his wife say her breast cancer has spread to her bone during a highly publicized news conference designed to reassure the public about the prognosis for her health and his candidacy. "The bottom line is, her cancer is back," John Edwards says.

Oct. 10: The National Enquirer reports that Edwards is having an affair.

Oct. 11: Edwards says the National Enquirer story is untrue. "The story is false. It's completely untrue, ridiculous," he tells reporters.

Dec. 19: The National Enquirer reports Hunter is Edwards' mistress and she is more than six months pregnant.

2008

Jan. 30: Edwards ends his bid for the White House.

Feb. 27: Hunter's daughter, Frances Quinn Hunter, is born. No father's name is given on the birth certificate filed in California.

May 14: Edwards endorses former rival Barack Obama.

July 22: The National Enquirer reports Edwards visited Hunter at a Los Angeles hotel on July 21 and left the morning after.

Aug. 8: Edwards admits to ABC News that he had an extramarital affair with Hunter, but denies fathering her child.

—The Associated Press





THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Former Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards and his wife, Elizabeth, arrive at a campaign rally in Ames, Iowa, in January. Elizabeth Edwards, who campaigned enthusiastically for her husband, is battling incurable cancer.

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