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Don't say 'no' to S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley

by [Susan Page](#) on Apr. 02, 2012, under [USA TODAY News](#)

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Walking down the tree-lined streets where she grew up, South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley remembers the day she was presented with a beach ball at the Wee Miss Bamberg pageant — not for winning, but as a consolation prize when she and her sister were disqualified.

“They pulled my parents aside and said they had a white queen and they had a black queen and they didn’t want to upset either side by putting us in that category,” she recalls, not the first time nor the last that their Indian heritage made it hard for her family to fit in this small town. “My mom said, ‘Can she at least do her talent?’ “

So she sang (irony alert) “This land is your land, this land is my land. ...” A family photo from that day shows a solemn Nikki in a ruffled dress and black patent-leather shoes, accepting the gift-wrapped package on stage as the other little girls squirm and chatter, waiting for the contest to continue.

How times have changed.

Now the “Welcome to Bamberg” signs along the two main highways brag, “Home of Nikki Haley.” Mayor Alton McCollum, her former junior-high principal, scrambles to pose for a photo with her that later makes the front page of the Bamberg *Advertiser-Herald*. Walking along the berm where railroad tracks once divided the black and white parts of town, she’s greeted by passing motorists who honk and wave.

Even so, for years she rebuffed her daughter’s entreaties to enter pageants because of an admittedly irrational fear that the same thing might happen to her. “That’s when you realize things sit with you,” Haley says. Feelings from the past “come running back.”

As a rule, Nimrata Randhawa Haley has been more interested in charging forward than looking back. At 40, she’s written a memoir that is not only the quintessential story of an immigrant family coming to America but also the tale of an unlikely political career. *Can't Is Not an Option* goes on sale today. (Sentinel; 245 pages; \$27.95)

A state legislator, she launched a bid for governor in 2010 that seemed quixotic, facing three better-known, better-funded primary rivals. After a bare-knuckles campaign in which she faced racial slurs and was forced to deny accusations of marital infidelity, she won the GOP nomination and then the election.

Now she is the first non-white governor in the state where the Civil War began. She is the first female governor in a state that for a decade has ranked dead last in the nation in percentage of elected officials who are women. (Even today, the 46-member South Carolina State Senate is 100% male.) She is the youngest governor in the country and a Tea Party favorite who sometimes is mentioned as a potential running mate for Republican front-runner Mitt Romney.

Her first year in office hasn't been entirely smooth. The state Legislature has stymied some of her key proposals. Several Republican officeholders already are discussing challenging her for the nomination if she seeks a second term. She endorsed Romney in the state's January primary, angering some conservative allies, only to see him crushed in the vote by former House speaker Newt Gingrich.

Still, when the governor's black limousine and SUV stop at the corner where she grew up, Bessie Cogburn, 63, hurries out to hug her. The Cogburns were neighbors in the old days; she phones her son Erick to run home from his job to see his childhood friend.

"Nikki was just such a hard worker," remembers Erick, 39. From the start, he says, setbacks just stiffened her resolve: "If you tell her 'no,' she'll make it happen."

Landing on the moon?

Her parents might as well have landed on the moon when they arrived in rural South Carolina in 1969. They were Sikhs who had emigrated from India to Canada, where her father earned his doctoral degree in biology, and then to the United States to take the only teaching job he could find, at Voorhees College. The small, historically black school is in Denmark, S.C.

At first, no one would rent a home to them, Haley says. When they finally arranged to buy one in nearby Bamberg, it came with conditions. They were prohibited from entertaining black people and committed to selling it back to the man they had bought it from.

"Just imagine a small Southern town of 2,500 people and this family moves in and the man wears a turban and the woman wears a sari, and they've never seen anything like that," Haley says during an interview at Bamberg City Hall. "It was Bamberg experiencing them for the first time and them experiencing Bamberg for the first time, and I think it was hard on both."

The family came to call themselves The Original Six: her parents, two brothers and a sister, a tightly knit clan that was able to take "all the armor off" only when the family was at home together on Sundays. Her mother taught sixth grade and started a small shop in their home offering foreign items from India and elsewhere. Eventually Exotica International became a multimillion-dollar clothing and gift store based in Lexington, S.C.

By the time Nikki was 13, her mother had drafted her to keep the store's accounts, an experience that forged a business-owner's appreciation of private enterprise and a conservative's suspicion of regulation. "I saw how hard it was to make a dollar and how easy it was for the government to take it," she says.

She earned an accounting degree at Clemson, worked for a waste-management company in Charlotte, then returned to help run the family business. She married Michael Haley, an employee of the U.S. Army and officer in the South Carolina Army National Guard; they had two children, Rena and Nalin.

She credits Hillary Clinton— whom she has never met, before or since — with the inspiration to jump into politics.

“I wanted to make a difference,” she says, “but everybody told me that I didn’t need to look into elective office. You know, ‘you’ve got two young children.’ And ‘you sure it’s right for a woman?’ And ‘why don’t you run for the school board? You don’t need to run for the statehouse.’ “

In 2003, she and friend Eleanor Kitzman went to a speech that Clinton, then a New York senator and now secretary of State, was giving at Furman University in Greenville. Haley remembers her message. “She said, ‘There will always be people who say you *shouldn’t* do something, but the only thing you should ... think about is why you *should* do something.’ She said, ‘Don’t listen to the naysayers.’ ...

“I walked out of there and I told Eleanor, ‘I’m not going to let anybody tell me I can’t do this anymore. I’m just going to do it.’ “

The next year, she ousted a 30-year incumbent from the state House. When she was frozen out by party leaders after pushing a proposal to require recorded votes in the legislature, she decided to run for governor. She says being able to sign that proposal into law was the proudest moment of her tenure to date.

Palin to the rescue

“The stars were in alignment” for her election as governor, Haley says. The emerging Tea Party was in sync with her policy views — small government, less regulation and lower taxes — and 2010 was a good year to be running as an outsider. Romney, whose presidential bid she had backed in 2008, endorsed her.

Then-governor Mark Sanford had offered to help, too, but his political implosion in a 2009 scandal over an extramarital affair made him a joke and his support toxic. Still, Sanford’s popular wife, Jenny, campaigned for her.

Then there was Sarah Palin.

Haley, who had never met Palin, said she had hoped against hope for her backing. In the final weeks of the campaign, Todd Palin called to say his wife would swing by South Carolina the next day to endorse her after addressing an NRA convention in Charlotte. The hastily arranged rally on the statehouse steps drew 1,500 people and provided a surge of support for Haley.

When the two women were chatting that day, Palin gave Haley some private advice. “She said, ‘When you start to rise, they’re going to come after you, and what you need to know is that it will never stop,’ ” Haley recalls. “At that time I didn’t understand it. Now I understand it. “

Two weeks before the primary, a former Sanford aide sparked a firestorm when he posted an item on his blog saying he had an affair with Haley several years earlier. A week later, a consultant who worked for one of her primary rivals released a statement saying he had a one-night stand with her. She denied both allegations.

Palin called from her home in Wasilla, Alaska, the day the first story broke. “It was just, ‘Nikki, is it true?’ ” Haley recalls. “And I said no, and she said, ‘Then let’s fight.’ ” Within minutes, Palin had posted a defiant message on her Facebook page: “Nikki Haley in Opposition’s Crosshairs: A Good Sign for Nikki and South Carolina!”

“She gave us credibility at a time we needed it, and she did it in a way that was strong and in a way that made a statement,” Haley says. An aide to Romney also called and said they were going to have a “Nikki Haley meeting” the next day to decide what to do; the former Massachusetts governor turned out to be supportive.

“They were both helpful,” Haley says, but she was struck by differences in their responses that reflected their personalities. “His was more reserved and cautious and professional,” she says. “Hers was, ‘Let’s go get ‘em!’”

Veep? ‘I wouldn’t take it’

Haley says she’s too focused on today to think about tomorrow.

She hasn’t thought about whether she will run for a second term in 2014 or if she might run for national office in 2016 or beyond, she says. She insists she wouldn’t run for vice president this year even if Romney asked her to join his ticket. “That’s not going to happen,” she says. “Even if it happens, I wouldn’t take it. I love being governor.”

Her election has disproved some long-standing stereotypes about her home state, she says. “I got to be the one who proved to people that South Carolina is not what people make it out to be,” she says. “You can’t say it’s a racist state anymore, and you can’t say it’s a backward state.” She adds, “I can tell you it’s a state that has changed tremendously over time, and for the better.”

Some memories still sting.

“My daughter wanted to be in a school pageant, and I for years just kept telling her, ‘No, no, don’t do it,’” Haley says. On her mind was her own experience at the Wee Miss Bamberg pageant. Her husband convinced her that incident was from a bygone era, and last month, Rena, 13, competed at her school’s pageant.

“She got first runner-up,” Haley says with a broad smile. “It was an amazing moment.”