Caught Between the Dog and the Fireplug OR How to Survive Public Service – The Play

Adapted from the book by Kenneth H. Ashworth (underlined dialogue is quoted verbatim from the book)

Actors:

John Park: Uncle Ken, an elder statesman of numerous positions in public service and Kim’s uncle
Christine Alvarado: Kim, Uncle Ken’s niece and college student studying public administration at a Texas institute of higher learning
Micky Eubanks: Micky, Kim’s classmate and obnoxious future leader
Amy Swinford: Amy, Kim’s nerdy classmate and BFF

Act 1

(Setting: A dorm room at a University somewhere in Texas...three young college students are gathered for an evening of study)

Kim: I don’t know about you guys, but reading my Uncle Ken’s letters over the last few months has really made me kind of depressed. Maybe my parents were right to be pissed at me...I mean, I had an offer to attend Harvard School of Business and I turned it down to attend Texas A&M? Anyway I’m totally second-guessing my decision to study public administration. Wonder if it’s too late to change my mind?

Amy: I know what you mean. Your Uncle’s description of some of the stuff he’s had to deal with over the years really bums me out. I mean, I don’t want to have spent all this time in school just to get out and have people yelling at me and pissed off at me all the time. What a drag!

Micky: Aww, come on guys, don’t start that crap again! We’ve been over this a million times. Public service sounds like it could be fun. Anyway, the way I see it, it’s at least a great way to meet girls.

Kim: Gimme a break Micky, is that all you ever think about? We’re trying to have a serious discussion here...

(Knock at the door)

Kim: Wonder who that is? Micky, did you order Dominos again?

Micky: I wish! You don’t have anything worth eating in here and I’m starving!...
Kim (getting up to answer the door): Shut up Micky. (Opens the door, shrieks) Oh my god, Uncle Ken, what are you doing here? (throws her arms around her uncle)

Uncle Ken (giving Kim a bear hug): Well, I'm in town to speak at a conference at the Bush Library; how could I not drop in on my favorite niece?

Kim: Uncle Ken, you know my friends Amy and Micky, don't you? (All greet each other)

Micky: I, for one, am happy to see you, Uncle Ken. We're supposed to be studying for our exam, and all Kim and Amy want to do is whine about why didn't they chose a different field... for the gazillionth time! Enough already...

Uncle Ken: Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I wondered at times if some of my letters were a little too, well, graphic in some of the details...

Amy: Uncle Ken, we really have enjoyed having Kim reading your letters to us. It's just that, it's hard to imagine getting grilled by legislators, standing up to governors, dealing with reporters, giving speeches to...

Uncle Ken: Whoa, now hold on, Amy. You're putting the cart before the horse, aren't you? You've got to walk before you can run, and you're not even out of school. So don't be worrying about those things yet. Let's go back and talk about why you all decided that public service was what you wanted to do with your lives. Remember how inspired you were with the notion that you could shape the future of this state, and even the nation? You are going to develop into a policy maker. You will become part of the elite because of the small ranks you will join and the resulting disproportionate weight you will carry as you and the agencies you work among affect and carry out public policies. Think about this: the next couple of decades hundreds of thousands of civil servants from the baby boomer generation will be retiring each year. All universities will graduate 30,000 public policy majors per year. Only a third of those are at the graduate level. You are almost certain to become a player in the policymaking process of this nation. I want to say again how pleased I am that you are now irrevocably committed to this field of rampant psychopathology, for you are joining the ranks of a few good men and women who strive to make the conditions of mankind more tolerable.

Kim: Well, when you say it like that, Uncle Ken, it IS inspiring. But tonight we're studying for an exam about state government, and it's just scary to think back on all the things you've said about the things you had to endure at the hands of legislators.

Uncle Ken (laughing): Well, I admit that it hasn't always been the most pleasant part of the job. I remember about a year ago I had to go to the capitol on some business, and after I parked my car and I was crossing the mall I noticed my stomach was tying itself into knots and I had this unexplained depression and sense of dread. I
knew suddenly that Pavlov was right. The legislature was not even in session and there I was with a conditioned reflex to the treatment I so often receive before committee hearings and in dealing with individual legislators.

Micky: Oh great, Uncle Ken, they don’t need to hear that again, they’re already such scaredy cats!

Uncle Ken: Sorry Micky, but I’m nothing if not honest. I need you all to know what you’re getting yourselves into, just in case you find yourselves having to go in front of the legislature.

Amy: Remind us what politicians can do to you in committee hearings? Those things you described in your letters sent chills up my spine. I’m not sure I’m cut out for that part of public service.

Uncle Ken: Well, one thing you learn early is that legislators are very current-issue oriented. What's been in the papers and on television and might have gotten the attention of voters? Those are the issues that often get dragged into a hearing on totally unrelated topics and get aired at length. This permits members to make their positions clear on what’s in the morning news, what's on the minds of their voters. You can see your silk purse of a hearing quickly become a pig’s ear if there is press coverage at your hearing and the questions and statements on your testimony devolve into a diatribe on something from the “City and State” page of a local newspaper.

Some legislators become notorious for their grandstanding and posturing for the voters. Once I was berated and abused for over two hours by two committee members about how I had for years denied their constituents their constitutional, legal, and rightfully deserved benefits from the state. When the committee broke for lunch the television crews heard what had been going on and showed up in force. When the committee reconvened with cameras all over the room, the morning performance was repeated, almost word for word. I was hardly permitted to respond or defend myself in either the original performance or in the replay. I was to stand there and take it, a necessary prop or “straight man.” I was not to play an active role other than to serve as a convenient foil and target of abuse. It is a humiliating thing to have to put up with, but often there is very little can do.

Micky: Wow, that sucks Uncle Ken! There’s no way I’d put up with that! I demand to be treated with more respect than that; I don’t care who these big deal politicians think they are!

Uncle Ken: That is one thing you learn early. As a paid public servant you are never equal to legislative committee members, and you should never expect to be. In terms of individual personal relations with legislators, you will find most of them are pleasant or certainly tolerable. Many politicians are downright charming. After all, they have not gotten to where they are by always being nasty or threatening to
other people. And in being charming they feel this entitles them to press to the very edge of what is socially acceptable to obtain what is politically desirable.

Kim: Tell us about that time one of them actually cut your pay.

Amy: What? You gotta be kidding me?

Uncle Ken (laughing): Unfortunately not. I had to say “no” to the overweening aspirations of a legislator to convert his local branch campus into a separate university and I testified on behalf of my governing board against his bill. On the floor of the House in debate on the appropriations bill, he reduced the line item for my salary. He worked with the Senate conferees to see that it was not restored. In the many years I knew him after he left the legislature he sent several messages through mutual acquaintances about how much he regretted later having done such a small-minded thing. But at the time it had not seemed small to him. I still remember watching from the gallery as he looked up to me from the House floor and smiled as his amendment passed to cut my salary.

Micky: OMG! Can they actually do things like that?

Uncle Ken: Indeed they can and they do! I guess it goes back to the old saying “No person’s life, liberty, or property is safe so long as the legislature is in session.”

Amy: See Micky? At least me and Kim have the brains to be afraid of people like that. I’ll tell you something else that worries me, Uncle Ken. It just seems like, from reading your letters, there’s so much conflict all the time. Someone is always mad at you, no matter how hard you’re working to do the right thing. I hate that! I just want everyone to like me.

Uncle Ken: Well, if that’s how you really feel, Amy, then maybe public service isn’t the career for you. In the end you need to understand that it is inevitable in dealing with politicians that you are going to have at least some of them mad at you from time to time. One or two may be mad at you all the time. You will find that if you are going to cam’ out the responsibilities of your job this is absolutely unavoidable. And unpleasant as it is to have people of power and prestige angry at you and to have to live with their emotional explosions and attacks, you will discover that there is usually a much larger number of other politicians who are looking on and who recognize that you are doing what you are expected to do. It is the nature of political relationships, however, that these other politicians don’t often speak up to defend or explain what you are doing. Why should they? As a result you can feel alone and unappreciated. One of my board chairmen, Harry Provence, summed it up best. Once when I was whining and complaining about my unpopularity and being caught so often between two opposing groups, he said, “You don’t understand Your job is to stand between the dog and the fireplug.”
Micky: Geez, Uncle Ken. This is all starting to bum me out. I thought you liked what you do and would be able to talk some sense into these “Debbie Downers.”

Uncle Ken: Sorry Micky, I’m just trying to answer your questions as honestly as I can. And I DO like what I do. You’ll find out quickly enough that all jobs come with their downsides.

Kim: Speaking of downers, let’s talk about dealing with the press. The other day, I talked to a reporter who called the Provost’s office where I’m volunteering. The next day, here’s an article in the paper and I was totally misquoted! I tried to explain to the Provost that is NOT what I said, but I’m not sure she believed me. So I called the reporter and chewed her out, but the damage was already done.

Uncle Ken: Miquotes? If you talk to reporters, you will be misquoted. It is rarely intentional. And calling the reporter’s boss or the publisher about a misquote is a good way to make an enemy of a reporter, or at least a less sympathetic listener. Besides, what is the best you can expect from such a call? A correction or retraction on an obscure inside page of a later edition? Better to call the reporter, point out the problem and make clear that it stops between you, no complaints higher up. She will owe you one. And usually she will be more careful in future stories.

Amy: What I really hate is that you never know if you can trust them. From what I’ve heard, one minute you’re having a casual conversation, and then suddenly you’re on the six-o’clock news!

Uncle Ken: Well, reporters will very rarely violate your request not to be quoted, certainly not intentionally. But you might remember that very often you are being recorded as the reporter makes notes. So don’t plan to backtrack on what you actually said. When you have been speaking off the record and you go back on the record, don’t forget that what you now say is quotable and attributable. Once I thought an interview was over, because the reporter and I had begun to chat about other topics of mutual interest. Then at the end he casually asked, “Oh, incidentally, how does your board feel about taking on this new assignment from the governor?” Forgetting that I was speaking for the record, I gave a casual response. What I said was on the front page of the Dallas Morning News the next day, “About like a mule looking at a new gate.” It was obviously a slow news day.

(All laugh hysterically)

Micky: Hey, remember the class we had where we had to brief some on-the-scene TV reporters about a mock disaster? That was CRAZY! It was hilarious to see some of our classmates try to explain what was going on in the heat of the moment. The BEST was when J.C. even started to chest bump the dudes and get in their faces! I thought I was going to bust a gut watching the video afterwards!
Uncle Ken: Yes, it can be pretty intense sometimes, that’s for sure. Don’t ever assume a reporter knows much of anything about what your agency does or what you do, especially television reporters. And they could care less about the points you want to convey to the public. Half the time they’ve already got their slant on their story and they’re performing. You are a prop or mere fixture.

Kim: Whoa, Uncle Ken, that’s the second time you’ve said that we’d just be used as props for others’ performances, first with legislators, and now with the press. I feel like, if I go into public service, I’m going to have some important things to say, and I want to be heard, not just be a puppet!

Uncle Ken: What I’m saying is this. Don’t let the people interviewing you control the interview. Decide on the one or, at most, two points you want to get across and then bore in on these...And hone a couple of sound bites beforehand....As much as the public seems to prefer television reporting over reading newspapers, it is the print press that you need to pay the most attention to if you want to reach politicians and other policymakers.

Micky: Hey you guys, can we take a break from this? I’m just getting overwhelmed and I’m feeling kind of “hangry.” What do you say we grab a few beers over a pizza and continue the conversation?

(The group agrees and files out of the room...)

Act II

(Setting: The group has reconvened over beers and pizza at a local pizzeria and is in the midst of a lively discussion...)

Amy: You know, the more we talk with you, Uncle Ken, the more I’ve decided that I AM up to the challenge, especially if you can provide us with some “tools of the trade.”

Kim: Yeah, give us more of your “secrets to success,” Uncle Ken. Your letters mentioned some really useful tips.

Micky: Yeah, and a few pointers on meeting some foxy girls would be great too!

Kim and Amy (in unison): Shut up, Micky!

Uncle Ken: Hmmm, tools of the trade, let’s see...let’s start with learning from your bosses. Because you aspire to reach the top someday, you should become an understudy to your bosses. You have the opportunity to make their every performance a rehearsal for yourself. Before your boss copes with a problem, devise
in your mind your own response. Before every public statement she must make, think how YOU would say it and what you would say. With every crisis that comes, large and small, ask what YOU would do. You must be like the first chair violinist, the concertmaster to a small symphony orchestra. Ever wonder why he always looks so worried—besides having to bring a perfect 440A to the orchestra to tune to? It’s because he may have to stand in for the conductor some night. As Harlan Cleveland used to say, “You can always recognize a successful executive by the worried look on his deputy’s face.”

Amy: But what if you have a boss you don’t want to emulate, what then?

Uncle Ken: Well, you can learn a lot from bad bosses too. The first thing you should learn from a bad boss is that you want to get the hell out of there. I watched one weak boss—from afar, fortunately—who managed to waste everyone’s time and talents all week long and then measured the performance and commitment of his staff by their willingness to come in with him on Saturdays to do busywork he created. He had a unique ability to trivialize his organization’s purpose through voluminous and meaningless activity. We coined a phrase for him, “If it isn’t worth doing, it isn’t worth doing well.”

Kim: Good stuff, keep it coming, Uncle Ken. Give us your thoughts about managing difficult people in the workplace. I think you said something like “diffident people are only four letters short of being difficult?”

Uncle Ken: Ah yes. Every workplace has them, that’s for sure. Every time you fill a vacancy you will face the danger of hiring such a person. How’s that for a terrifying thought? You must clean up your own messes when you make a bad hire. You will be tempted to reorganize around your problems. This rarely works. Reform the bad performers or move them out.

Micky: Speaking of hiring, I think I remember you saying something like “First-class people hire first-class people; second-class people hire third class people.”

Uncle Ken: That’s right, Micky. Never be afraid to hire people smarter than you are. You’re going to need all the help you can get to look good. Besides, it will amaze your friends and confound your enemies.

Amy: Yeah, Micky, you ARE going to need all the help you can get to look good, haha! So Uncle Ken, let’s assume that somehow we actually manage to hire the right people. How do we keep them engaged in the mission of their work and prevent them from just becoming bureaucrats?

Uncle Ken: Well, that’s easier said than done of course, but in general, if you are challenged, involved, and given responsibility for how you get your tasks done you know you are happier and as a result more productive. The same is true of every person who will ever work for you. Nurture in them the same qualities and attitudes
toward work you would like to seek for yourself, and most will thrive. You might even reward a little democratic insubordination occasionally. When people feel they can speak up freely to make suggestions or disagree with proposed assignments or procedures, you will get a lot more brainpower applied to your problems.

Kim: I like it! The idea of democratic insubordination sure flies in the face of most government entities, with all of the rules and regulations they create. I don't want to become one of those people who create a bunch of regulations other people have to follow. It’s just not me!

Amy: Me either! And did you ever notice that the people who created the need for rules are the same ones that flagrantly violate them as soon as they’re in place? That makes me crazy!

Micky: Oh is that what it is? I wondered...

Amy: Whatever, Micky...

Uncle Ken: Yes, you’re absolutely right. I think it was Brown University president Henry Wriston that said "Every time a formula is substituted for responsible judgement, there is official defeasement. Rules make decision easy but rob it of wisdom.

Kim: Uncle Ken, how do you know so many brilliant quotes? I wish I could quote famous people the way you do, it has obviously come in handy in many situations. Will I be able to do the same some day?

Uncle Ken: Well, if you read as much as I do, it will be second nature. Since we’re talking about “tools of the trade,” I can’t emphasize enough how important reading, writing, and speaking will be to your careers. In my opinion, the MOST important of those is reading. Once when I was giving a group of graduate students this same gratuitous but stellar advice, a young woman asked me was it really necessary to read? She said she had never liked reading but she watched the history and discovery and biography television channels. Wouldn’t this substitute for reading? I may have offended her. But I said, no, there is no substitute for reading if you expect to get to the top in your field or be an effective leader. You don’t want to spend a large part of your life reading? Forget your public career; it will go exactly nowhere. I can tell you one thing with certainty, if you don’t want to read you will soon be working for somebody who does.

Amy: I love reading, but nowadays there’s so much to read. How do we know we’re reading the things that will really help us? And please tell Micky that People magazine doesn’t count.

(Micky and Amy stick out their tongues at each other)
Uncle Ken: Now, now kids. Well, let’s see...Take at least one great general newspaper and start reading editorials, syndicated columnists, and the op-ed pages as well as the news. Subscribe to two or three good journals that are read by thinking people and learn what the people who shape public policy are concerned about...Read biographies. Through them you can see how people who made history lived and thought and acted. Biographies come closer than any other record to giving you a sense of the myriad range of events and issues a leader has to deal with at the same time and make progress on most of them.

Now to the importance of writing well to your success...the only way to become master over words and to control them and make them do what you want them to do is to practice writing...you will need to write and to work seriously at writing. This will be a principal tool of your trade and you must learn to write with precision. Inadequacy in writing skills will hold back your rise to leadership positions.

Micky: I suppose you have some suggestions about what to write?

Uncle Ken: Sure. How about descriptions of childhood events, poetry, briefing memos, op-ed pieces? Study your professional journals and the kinds of articles they are printing. You should start trying to publish, no matter how insignificant the media.

Kim: If we're good at reading and writing, do we have to worry about speaking well? I just hate getting up and talking in front of people. Sometimes I feel like I'm going to throw up!

Uncle Ken: Ah yes, I’m very familiar with the sensation. If in your early public speaking you feel rattled and excessively nervous, let me give you some personal reassurance. It doesn’t improve. Well, maybe a little. It is not a question of whether you get nervous; it is how you learn to handle nerves.

Micky: Uncle Ken, YOU get nervous before a speech? I can’t believe it! You always seem so calm and in control...Why, you said you’re in town to talk at the Bush Library, that’s the big leagues!

Uncle Ken: I tell you all this so you will know the sacrifices I make every time I give a speech. Debilitating is hardly an adequate word for the suffering many speakers undergo. Experience helps some people. Yet there have been outstanding, world-famous opera singers and actors and actresses who have thrown up before every performance out of fear of doing poorly or being unable to perform. Then they almost uniformly go out and do a superb job. You will learn to do so too, without throwing up, hopefully. So welcome to the club. Start getting used to it. This is something else that goes with the territory.

Amy: These are all such great tips, Uncle Ken. I wish I would have brought a notebook so I could write them all down.
Kim: Me too. Well, let’s go back to my room; we can finish studying and Uncle Ken can check into his hotel room. I’m sure you have some preparations to do before your speech tomorrow?

Uncle Ken: I sure do. I believe it was Pericles who said “a person who has knowledge about proper policy but has no ability to express it might as well have no idea at all on the matter.” I intend to ensure that I successfully convey my ideas to my audience!

(The group departs the pizzeria)

Act III

(Setting: Kim’s dorm room)

Uncle Ken: I think we’ve covered a fair bit of ground tonight going over the nuts and bolts of your future careers in public service. Everything from dealing with the legislature and the press to learning from your boss, hiring the right people, and learning how to be effective communicators. Would you say you are feeling a little better now about your choices and a little better prepared to face the challenges?

Kim, Amy, Micky (in unison): Most definitely! For sure! Yes, Uncle Ken, thanks!

Uncle Ken: Well good. It was time well spent and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed the conversations. But I would be remiss if I didn’t leave you with a few thoughts on the topic of leadership.

Micky: Fantastic! I was hoping we would get to talk about my favorite subject – wielding control and power over my minions (evil laugh)...

Kim: Wrong answer, Micky. You should know better from what we’ve been studying in our leadership class. Disagreeable people look at leaders and see that leaders have power and they see leaders as being in control. Ergo, they deduct: Control and power are what make a leader.

Amy: But they have it backwards. What they do not see is that power and control come to the leader by virtue of being able to lead, recruiting followers, and envisioning and enunciating a future that people want to help bring about.

Uncle Ken: Very good, girls, I’m impressed! Sounds like at least some of you have been studying my letters and taking them to heart. So tell me a few characteristics of good leaders?
Kim: First, leaders care about their people. Being able to get the right people in the right positions and looking after them will do more to make a leader successful than probably any other single thing she does.

Uncle Ken: Good! Continue...

Amy: Second, leaders protect their people and look after their welfare. Leaders take the blame and spread the credit. No leader will last long who lets his subordinates take the fall for his errors or the organization’s mistakes. Even when a subordinate is to blame for some mistake within the organization, the executive should take the hit in public; she can settle accounts with the employee in private.

Uncle Ken: Don’t quit now, you’re on a roll...

Micky: I’ve got this! Another characteristic of leaders is they have a lot of energy and they expend it in specific ways. Their energy manifests itself in commitment and drive as well as in never giving up. And they spend a lot of their energy in making professional contacts and friends.

Uncle Ken: That’s right. I can usually spot a leader in the making. They are continually building new relationships, creating networks, getting to know more people, joining another association or professional organization. They push new ideas and they don’t quit easily...They are often persistent to the point of being annoying or even obnoxious...

Amy: Hey, Micky, some of your traits are finally going to pay off!

Kim: It just seems to me that leadership is part theatre as well as content, image as well as substance, persona as well as purpose and meaning.

Micky: And there are only so many hours in the day. How do we get done all the “leader stuff” while continuing to do the things that got us into these leadership positions?

Uncle Ken: A leader should not get bogged down in details and doing the small jobs just because he has learned over the years how to do them well or because he enjoys them...Each time you move up in job responsibilities you have to learn to stop doing some of the things you used to do...I assure you that focusing on the small tasks and details will keep you from your principal responsibilities You need to be thinking and gaining perspective on the issues your agency faces and what will be coming your way. You, of all the people in the agency, need to be looking ahead. You need to be making outside contacts. You need to be reading. You need to be recharging your batteries.
Kim: I like what you said in one of your last letters: If you do not find ways to capture some time for your own thinking and vision, every day can become programmed to pass in this way. That’s the life you are headed toward. Don’t let it inundate you. And don’t let yourself be nibbled to death by mice, the minutiae of management.

Uncle Ken: Yes, that’s right, and I think that this can be one of the most challenging aspects of developing your own routine that allows you to accomplish what you were hired to do.

Well, I really must be going to put the finishing touches on my speech. I trust you will all be in attendance tomorrow with your leadership class?

Kim, Micky, Amy (in unison): Absolutely! For sure! Wouldn’t miss it for the world!

Uncle Ken: Great! I’ll give you a small preview of what I will say tomorrow, which is this – Be positive. Keep perspective. There is no such thing as fairness about life; know that the universe owes us nothing. If economics is the dismal science, politics, which is really the business of leadership, has to be the cheerful science. A leader, a politician, a public administrator truly believes he or she can make a difference, things can be made better, a brighter future can be achieved through organization, hard work, and the relentless application of professional skills.

I wish you all good luck on your exam tomorrow, I know you’ll do fine. And Kimmy, you make me so proud that you’ve chosen to follow in my footsteps (gives Kimmy a hug) Good night all!

Kim, Micky, Amy (in unison): Good night Uncle Ken! Thanks so much! Thanks for your words of wisdom!

The End