

KNOCKING on the DOOR

Women in the Wisconsin Legislature

The Wisconsin Legislature represents all of the people of Wisconsin. Legislators hail from all walks of life and socioeconomic backgrounds and come to the legislature with different life experiences and political outlooks. Members of the legislature represent small towns and villages, major urban centers, university and college towns, thriving suburban communities, and sparsely populated rural areas. They work in business, agriculture, law, education, health care, and many other trades and professions. In their personal and family lives, they resemble other Wisconsin citizens: legislators are husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and parents and children. The strength and vitality of the Wisconsin Legislature comes from the commonalities between its members and the diverse body of people they represent.

This article introduces the women who serve in the Wisconsin Legislature and discusses their experiences. The article is about representation, about standing for the people of Wisconsin, as seen from the perspectives of women legislators. An article on women legislators is timely and important. In recent years, women have assumed major leadership roles in the legislature. Women are now a vital part of the leadership team in each political party in each house. During the 2015 legislative session, women served as senate president, assistant senate majority leader, senate minority leader, and assistant assembly minority leader; women also served as co-chairs of the Joint Committee on Finance, the Joint Audit Committee, and the Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules. These are power positions in Wisconsin government. During the 2015 legislative session, there were 11 senators and 23 representatives who

We would like to thank all of the following women who served in the Wisconsin Legislature for sharing their insights and experiences in public life:

SENATORS IN THE 2015 SESSION

Janet Bewley (D-25)
Alberta Darling (R-8)
Nikiya Harris Dodd (D-6)
Sheila Harsdorf (R-10)
Julie Lassa (D-24)
Mary Lazich (R-28)
Janis Ringhand (D-15)
Jennifer Shilling (D-32)
Lena Taylor (D-4)
Kathleen Vinehout (D-31)
Leah Vukmir (R-5)

Janel Brandtjen (R-22)
Cindi Duchow (R-99)
Mary Felzkowski (R-35)
Dianne Hesselbein (D-79)
LaTonya Johnson (D-17)
Samantha Kerkman (R-61)
Debra Kolste (D-44)
Amy Loudenbeck (R-31)
Beth Meyers (D-74)
Sondy Pope (D-80)
Jessie Rodriguez (R-21)
Melissa Sargent (D-48)
Katrina Shankland (D-71)
Christine Sinicki (D-20)
Amanda Stuck (D-57)
Lisa Subeck (D-78)
Chris Taylor (D-76)
Nancy VanderMeer (R-70)
JoCasta Zamarripa (D-8)

REPRESENTATIVES IN THE 2015 SESSION

Joan Ballweg (R-41)
Terese Berceau (D-77)
Kathy Bernier (R-68)
Jill Billings (D-95)

FORMER MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE

Alice Clausing (senator 1993 through 1999 sessions, D)
Barbara Lorman (senator 1979 through 1993 sessions, R)
Mary Panzer (senate majority leader 2003 to 2004, senator 1993 through 2003 sessions, representative 1979 through 1993 sessions, R)
Judith Biros Robson (senate majority leader 2007, senator 1999 through 2009 sessions, representative 1987 through 1997 sessions, D)
Carol Roessler (senator 1987 through 2007 sessions, representative 1983 through 1987 sessions, R)
Peggy Rosenzweig (senator 1993 through 2001 sessions, representative 1983 through 1993 sessions, R)
Patricia Strachota (assembly majority leader 2014, representative 2005 through 2013 sessions, R)
Barbara Ulichny (senator 1985 through 1991 sessions, representative 1979 through 1983 sessions, D)
Mary Williams (representative 2003 through 2013 sessions, R)



(BOTH PHOTOS) JAY SALVO. LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

The 2015 legislative session included 11 women senators and 23 women representatives. (*top*) Senators Leah Vukmir and Alberta Darling (*seated*) confer on the floor. (*above*) Members of the assembly JoCasta Zamarripa, Terese Berceau, and Melissa Sargent (*left to right*) attend a press conference.

were women. This is down from a peak of 37 women legislators in the 1989 and 2003 legislative sessions. But numbers, although an easy way to gauge women's progress, provide only a partial picture.

Every senator and representative has a story, a narrative about his or her origins, childhood, and family. This article captures some of these stories. A theme that will run throughout the narratives is the importance of parents,



Alice Clausing

MORE TO ACCOMPLISH

For former Senator Alice Clausing, her political drive came from the desire to protect and restore the environment, after moving to Menomonie, Wisconsin, and seeing the poor state of Lake Menomin. She recalls her inauguration:

“When I was elected [in 1992], I was working on that ‘Clean the Green’ bill. And it was ten days after I was elected [that] the rule took the effect of law. So I got there, and I accomplished, really, my main purpose for going there. And then, when I got there, I’m standing up there taking my oath of office, and they said that I was the tenth woman since 1848 to become a Wisconsin State Senator. And at first, I thought, ‘Holy baby, I really accomplished something.’ And then I thought, ‘You know, there’s so much more to accomplish.’”

siblings, friends, and local communities on the career choices of women legislators.

Every person who enters the political arena must first make the heady decision to seek political office. This article documents the different routes that women took before they made the decision to run for the legislature. Many were leaders in their chosen professions or trades, many were active in volunteer and community organizations, and many were accomplished leaders in college or the workplace. Some women decided on their own to seek political office, while others were actively recruited.

Life on the campaign trail is a challenge, with long hours and many demands on a candidate’s family. Campaign organizations must be assembled, and candidates must canvass the entire district, knock on constituents’ doors, fundraise, and appear in public as often as possible. In addition, public policy positions must be staked out and carefully articulated. These are time-consuming but necessary tasks. This article looks at the campaign experiences of women legislators to see what role, if any, gender played in the campaigns. Among the many questions this article addresses are: Did the media treat women candidates differently or have different expectations for women candidates? How was the candidacy of a woman for legislative office viewed in her community? What lessons were learned on the campaign trail?

There are many possible career routes in the legislature. Some members become experts in a certain public policy area, while others pursue membership on key legislative committees that directly serve their districts' immediate interests. Some play an active role in their political party caucus and pursue a leadership position early in their careers, while others bide their time before seeking a leadership position. Some legislators become active and prominent drafters of legislation, even across many different subject matters, while other legislators play less visible roles in building consensus and forging compromise around legislation drafted by others. None of these paths is exclusive and the usual legislative career path is an amalgam of different roles. This article charts the routes that women legislators took once in office and identifies what obstacles, if any, they confronted in their legislative careers. Many issues will be discussed, such as: Did women legislators have mentors to guide them? Were women encouraged to pursue one path over another? How did partisanship affect their legislative choices?

An important feature of this article is that the legislative careers of women are examined and discussed during different periods. The article therefore focuses not just on women legislators in the 2015 legislature, but also on women who previously served in the legislature. The political atmosphere in the 1990s or early 2000s, after all, may have been very different from that of today and could have contributed to different experiences. For example, partisanship may matter more now than it once did, though this is by no means certain.

Former Senator Peggy Rosenzweig hit the campaign trail frequently during her time in office, which spanned from the early 1980s to the 2000s. Although technology has changed many things related to political campaigns, personal appearances and interactions remain a vital element.



If partisanship matters more, it may be that gender matters less, as voters increasingly base their voting decisions on political party allegiance and less on the gender or ethnicity of the person seeking office. This article looks at these issues and concludes with the reflections of these women as they look back at their legislative experiences, assess their legislative successes, and offer advice to a new generation of women who may wish to pursue political careers in the Wisconsin Legislature.

The title of this article, “Knocking on the Door,” is taken from a core experience that every candidate faces on the campaign trail: knocking on the doors of constituents and presenting oneself to the voters. It is a rite of passage for every candidate and demands the most from them, as voters relate their concerns, worries, and problems to candidates. Representative Jessie Rodriguez captured this concisely when she said “the first door you knock on is the hardest.” This idea of knocking on the door applied well, we thought, to the experience of women during the last century as they knocked on the doors of the capitol in their quest to gain admittance to the ranks of Wisconsin legislators. More than 5,500 people have served in the Wisconsin Legislature, but only 133 of those have been women. The first women—Mildred Barber, Hellen Brooks, and Helen Thompson—took office as representatives to the assembly in 1925 and the first woman—Kathryn Morrison—was elected to the senate for the 1975 legislative session. Women have been knocking on the door for almost 100 years and, as this article documents, they have gained admittance.

Backgrounds of women legislators

The women of the 2015 legislature hold an extensive breadth of life experience and bring this experience to bear when representing their communities. Their backgrounds vary by geography, age, religious affiliation, race, ethnicity, political experience, education, and employment. The ages of the 34 women who were part of the 2015 legislature ranged from 29 years to 72 years, with the median age being 53.5 years. Of the 23 women in the assembly, five were freshman legislators elected in 2014. (One woman was elected in a special election in 2015.) Of the 11 women in the 2015 senate, two were newly elected in 2014. (Senators in even and odd districts are elected in alternating elections.) In the senate, two women identified themselves as African American. In the assembly, one woman identified herself as African American and two women identified themselves as Latina or Hispanic. Fourteen women identified themselves in the 2015–2016 *Blue Book* as full-time legislators, and seven identified themselves as business owners or participating in small business. The women



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Of the more than 5,500 people who have served in the Wisconsin Legislature, only 133 have been women. (*top left*) The 1865 Assembly typifies the legislative profile until 1925, when Mildred Barber, Helen Thompson, and Hellen Brooks (*above, left to right*) were the first women elected to serve in the assembly. It wasn't until 1975 that a woman, Kathryn Morrison (*top right*), was elected to the senate.

of the 2015 legislature have backgrounds as insurance agents, farmers, teachers, and community leaders, as well as a host of other career experiences. Some are from large families; some are only children. Some stayed close to their roots; others made their way to Wisconsin from other states. Some legislators grew up with an interest in politics; others found their way to politics later in life.

Several women legislators represent their hometown. Senate Assistant Majority Leader Leah Vukmir is from Brookfield originally; after she raised her family in Wauwatosa, she then returned to live in Brookfield. Representative



Terese Berceau

TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

For women growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, traditional gender roles sometimes had a large impact on how they were raised. Representative Terese Berceau, who grew up in Green Bay, watched her mother break the constraints of those traditional roles:

“My dad worked a lot. I would call him low white collar.

He worked for a pickle factory in Green Bay—[the] Green Bay Pickle Company. We always had pickles in the house, and we didn’t necessarily want to eat them. But my mother did not go to work until my last sister entered grade school. She found a job—I think her first job was filing for an insurance company or a doctor’s office. Apparently, either she didn’t discuss it with my dad or my dad did not take her seriously, because he was very upset. [He came] from a very traditional point of view that he was supposed to be the breadwinner, and he was so upset that when she got her first check, she decided that she would go out and buy him a new television, because that was one of the things he did with his free time. So she went out and bought a television, and he would not watch it; he would not use it. So he had a real hard time with that. I don’t know if he ever got over that. And then she topped it off [the time] I called her and she said, in a whisper, ‘I bought a house.’ And I said, ‘Why are you whispering?’ ‘I didn’t tell your dad.’ Anyway, she saw a house that she liked. It was a modest home, but it was something that she liked, in a better neighborhood, etc. And she didn’t tell my dad. I asked her why, and she said, ‘Because he has a toothache and he’s in a bad mood.’ He, I am told, cried when she told him because it was such an assault on his view of what the man is in charge of.”

Amanda Stuck was raised in Appleton and now represents that area in the assembly. Representative Melissa Sargent grew up in Madison and now raises her family in the city while she serves in the assembly. Representative Dianne Hesselbein, who became Assembly Assistant Minority Leader in 2017, is from Madison; though she lived for a time in Texas during her childhood, she now represents a large area of Dane County outside of Madison. Senator Lena Taylor was born and raised in Milwaukee and currently lives on the block on which she grew up. Representative JoCasta Zamarripa grew up in Milwaukee but spoke



Representative JoCasta Zamarripa, who was born and raised in Milwaukee, grew up inspired by women like her grandmother, a migrant farmer who brought her family to Wisconsin, and her aunt, who was politically and socially active in her community.

proudly of her large family network and the unique path her family followed, coming to Wisconsin with roots in Texas and Mexico: “I always credit my grandmother, she was a migrant farmer . . . and she would come up and work in the farm fields picking vegetables. So that’s how she discovered Wisconsin, and she decided—she felt like there were a lot of job opportunities here. She felt that there were a lot better economic opportunities for herself and her family.”

Other legislators were transplants to their districts. Representative Rodriguez, who represents South Milwaukee, was born in El Salvador and grew up in Salem, Massachusetts. Some, like former Senator Barbara Lorman, are first-generation Americans. Senator Alberta Darling spent her childhood in a Lithuanian community in Cicero, Illinois; she was

the only child who spoke English in her grade at school. Former Senator Peggy Rosenzweig lived all over the United States before settling in Wisconsin. She was born in Detroit, then moved with her father during World War II to military posts in Texas and Tennessee. She attended the Julliard School in New York for dance, and after she married, she lived with her husband in Denver, Colorado. After her husband’s medical residency, they moved back to the Midwest and settled in Milwaukee. Senator LaTonya Johnson grew up in Tennessee and came to Wisconsin when she was 12 years old. She described her rural Tennessee childhood before arriving in Milwaukee:

I originally grew up in a small town called LaGrange, Tennessee. It’s really, really tiny. I think it has a population of 150 people. And I was raised by my grandmother. My mom gave birth to me when she was 15, so by the time I was probably old enough to remember, my mom had already moved away. And so I grew up in this little three-room shack. And it was a shack—we had no indoor plumbing, so we walked to the well to collect all of our water to bring in to the house. I didn’t live in a house with indoor plumbing until I moved to Milwaukee.



JAY SALVO, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Senator LaTonya Johnson, who now represents Milwaukee, grew up in a “little three-room shack” in a tiny town in Tennessee, arriving in Wisconsin when she was 12 years old. Later, running a day care for low-income children sparked her interest in running for statewide office.

Most of the legislators grew up in the working class or came, as former Senate President Mary Lazich recounted, from “small humble beginnings.” Some said that their families accepted government assistance. Senator Kathleen Vinehout, whose parents met while serving in the military, noted that at times her family received food stamps. Representative Beth Meyers, who was born and raised in northern Wisconsin, worked seasonal jobs on Madeline Island

and said that at the end of the season, people in the area often had to go on unemployment or welfare in order to meet their needs.

The women legislators also had a variety of educational backgrounds. In the 2015 legislature, 19 women had earned bachelor's degrees, 8 had earned master's degrees, 2 had earned law degrees, and one had earned a Ph.D. Several women, including Representatives Jill Billings and Joan Ballweg, were the first in their families to attend college. Senator Janet Bewley, who became Senate Assistant Minority Leader in 2017, was the first person in her family to go to college, and she then went on to graduate school. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and lived at home while attending college, then moved to Ashland for



Kathleen Vinehout

A DIFFERENT PATH TO COLLEGE

Senator Kathleen Vinehout recalled:

“There were years when my father only made four thousand dollars a year; of course, this was back in the sixties, but still, four thousand dollars a year. I was the oldest of five children. It wasn’t easy at all. So I kind of learned how to get by. I got my first job when I was 14: I became a nurse’s assistant, making \$2.30 an hour, helping to take care of old people in a nursing home. I very much wanted to go to college, but my parents—especially my dad—didn’t want me to. My father felt that a college education was wasted on a woman, that her only role was to get married and have children. When it came time for me to actually apply to go to college, he wouldn’t sign my financial aid papers. Of course my family is very poor, so that was a huge blow to me, because I knew I could get in. I really, really, really wanted to go to college.

I became an independent student. I left home the day I turned 18, I continued to work as a nurse’s aide, and [I] went to local community college—technical college. I went there for two years. At the time, to be an independent student you had to be away from your parents’ home for [a certain] period of time. After that period of time was over, I was able to apply on my own, on my own income. I was accepted at the college that was [the] farthest away from my family home that was still a public university: Southern Illinois University. I went there and became an education major, but I was very, very, very motivated to further my education.”

her first job in 1977 and made her home there, becoming the dean of students at Northland College.

Many of the women completed their education later in life. Former Senator Rosenzweig, for example, finished her degree at UW-Milwaukee after having five sons. Representative Kathy Bernier had no plans for higher education when she went through high school in Chippewa Falls: “We were low income, so little did I know—and no one talked to me in high school about it either because I



Representative Joan Ballweg (left) was one of the first people in her family to go to college. She is shown here at her high school graduation in 1970, accompanied by her proud aunt, Lis.

was sort of an average student—about higher education. I know that’s changed now. So, higher education wasn’t an option that I was aware of.” However, at age 37, she decided to go to college and earned her bachelor’s degree.

Wisconsin has more than 14 million acres of farmland, and many women legislators were raised in rural areas. Former Senator Julie Lassa grew up in



Janet Bewley

A DIFFERENT PATH TO COLLEGE

Senator Janet Bewley remembered:

“I always knew I wanted to go [to college], and I don’t know why. Because my dad sat us down and said, ‘I’ll put the boys through school, but not the girls.’ He worked hard, and he truly believed that he was doing the right thing—that the boys needed to grow up and raise a family, and the girls didn’t; they would get married, and so we didn’t have to have a college education. ‘So yeah, go ahead Janet, and if you want to go to college, fine, you know, we won’t stop you, but I’m not going to pay [for] you. I’m not going to give you any money for it.’ And I [had] no language to say, ‘That’s wrong,’ because that was the way it was done.”



Senator Janet Bewley (*center*) was told by her father that he would not pay for her to go to college, but he would pay for her brothers' educations. Bewley attended college and graduate school anyway and eventually became the dean of students at Northland College in northern Wisconsin.

northern Portage County on a dairy farm. She said that she was not able to get involved in too many extracurricular activities until college, as her family had just one car, and they typically made only one trip into Stevens Point per week to run errands. Representative Mary Felzkowski grew up working on her family's Christmas tree farm in Tomahawk, Wisconsin. She helped with the business, which included retail lots not only in Wisconsin, but also in Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska. Her father also owned an insurance agency, which she now owns and runs while also serving her hometown area in the assembly. Senator Sheila Harsdorf was raised on a dairy farm in Lake Elmo, Minnesota, and later moved the farm to Beldenville, Wisconsin. She farmed for several years before deciding to follow in her brother's footsteps and run for a seat in the state legislature. Representative Debra Kolste spent her childhood in a small town in western Nebraska. She attended the University of Nebraska and trained as a medical technician. After she married, she moved with her husband, a physician, to a small town in Kansas, where they built their own clinic. They then moved to Janesville to raise their three children in a more urban setting. Representative Bernier was bussed to kindergarten in Chippewa Falls because her rural hometown, Lake Hallie, did not have a kindergarten. She then attended elementary school in a three-room school house, where she had two teachers for four grades of school. Representative Sondy Pope had a similar rural school experience growing up in Iowa County, Wisconsin, on a small family farm. She recalled, "I attended a one-room country school for four years, where anywhere

from seven to nine children filled the eight grades. Pumped water, put it in the red wing crock in the morning. Went to the bathroom down on the flat in one of the two buildings. Same school my dad went to.”

Other legislators grew up in more urban settings. Former Senator Nikiya Harris Dodd and Representative Christine Sinicki grew up in Milwaukee and came to represent their hometown area in the legislature. Representative Amy Loudbeck lived in suburban Detroit and suburban Chicago, then attended UW-Madison and decided to stay and make Wisconsin home. She settled with her husband in the Clinton area. Senator Vinehout was born in New York, raised in the Chicago suburbs, and moved to Wisconsin as an adult to become a full-time farmer. Representative Chris Taylor was born in Los Angeles, came to UW-Madison for law school, and remained after graduating. Former Senate Majority Leader Judith Biros Robson was raised in Cleveland, Ohio, and initially attended Ohio State University. However, she came to UW-Madison after having a federal traineeship pulled by the faculty at Ohio State because she was pregnant. She completed her education as a geriatric nurse practitioner at UW-Madison and settled in Wisconsin, where she served almost 23 years in the assembly and the senate.

Many women legislators had politicians in their immediate family. Representative Samantha Kerkman grew up interested in politics, as her father has

Former Senate Majority Leader Judith Biros Robson spent her childhood in Cleveland and came to Wisconsin to finish her college degree. Her grandmother immigrated to the United States from the remote village of Ovčie in Slovakia. Robson is shown here in Slovakia with the headstones of her great-grandparents.





Representative Samantha Kerkman's father was a supervisor for the Town of Randall and got her involved in politics at an early age. She is pictured here with her father, Mark Starzyk (*left*), visiting the capitol building office of Senator Joseph Andrea (*right*) in the early 1990s.

served on the town board since she was born and took her to political events during her childhood. Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling moved around with her family as her father pursued an interest in public service; he worked for Governor Martin Schreiber and for Secretary of State Vel Phillips. Senator Shilling's grandfathers were also public servants: one was a circuit court judge in northern Wisconsin, and the other was a city council member and mayor.

While some legislators were raised in political families and others, like Representative Kerkman, studied political science, others took a less direct route to legislative service. Legislators have had a variety of careers, including medicine, education, agriculture, and small business. Senator Harsdorf was a farmer before entering politics. When talking about her first election, she said, "I was at a dinner and somebody said, 'Well, what's your background?' And I said, 'I have a degree in animal science.' And they said, 'Oh. Not political science?' [*laughter*] And I said no. And they said, 'Well, you must have minored in poli-sci.' And I said no. And it's important for people to recognize that you can learn the governmental process, but it's very beneficial to bring with you those experiences that you've learned either through having your own business or working for someone else." Representative Ballweg noted that her family's John Deere farm equipment business is one of the larger businesses in



Representative Joan Ballweg's family runs a large farm equipment business in Markesan, which led to her involvement in local politics, then state politics. She is shown here with her husband, Tom, at the business they have run together for over 40 years.

the Markesan community, leading to the family's involvement in the local chamber of commerce and, eventually, politics.

The decision to seek office

The legislators described a variety of influences that led to the decision to run for public office. Many were inspired by example at a young age. Some found that inspiration in a public figure; others had a passion for politics ignited by their own family. And many women legislators described how, later in life, their education, their business experience, or a particu-

lar cause or public policy close to their hearts motivated them to run.

One of those who found inspiration in public figures, Representative Stuck, described “[falling] in love with politics and policy” after seeing Bill Clinton speak during his first presidential campaign. Former Senate Majority Leader Robson was “enthralled” with John F. Kennedy and “heeded his challenge to be active for your country, be passionate about your country, be passionate about public service, and really make a difference, just don’t complain, and be positive.” Some were inspired by more local public figures. Representative Meyers recalled her former supervisor, Rose Gurnoe, who was the tribal chairwoman of the Red Cliff Tribe. It was inspirational, she said, “to know that a woman could be the leader of a tribal nation.”

For some, public service was a value instilled by family at an early age. Former Senator Lorman’s family was instrumental in her passion for public service: “My family, my dad, loved politics. I was only 15 when he died. But I remember him having these big discussions. He loved Franklin Roosevelt and my mom liked public service. I am a first-generation American. My parents were foreign born, and my mom would say over and over and over, ‘You need to give back. You just need to do something because we should be grateful for living here.’ So she was always volunteering.” Former Senate Majority Leader Mary Panzer grew up with a father who was heavily involved in local and state government in addition to farming and conducting business in insurance,



Mary Panzer

CHANGES SEEN THROUGH GENERATIONS

Former Senate Majority Leader Mary Panzer talked about accompanying her father, Senator Frank Panzer, to work in the 1950s and 1960s, and how the lack of women in the legislature did not match her experience on the family's farm:

"My aunt and my mom were very, very involved in the business, making decisions, and managing and running things, including finances . . . so I found it very odd. I remember asking my dad, 'Why aren't there more women here?' And he said, 'Well, there's no reason why there can't be, and if you want to do that someday, you should do that when you're old enough.'"

Senator Panzer not only became a legislator, but a leader in state politics. She remembers her mother's reaction:

"She loved the fact that her daughter could do things. Like when my dad was in the legislature, the Madison Club was sort of the male bastion, and a woman had to walk in the side door. And it was also a sleeping club. So my mother said to my father, 'When I get to walk in the front door, you get to lay your head on a pillow. Otherwise, no. We're not raising our family, our kids that way. We're not setting those kinds of examples.' So when I got sworn in, she loved to go to the Madison Club, because she could walk in the front door on her daughter's membership."



Former Senate Majority Leader Mary Panzer was joined by her mother, Verna (*left*), and her daughter, Melissa (*right*), at her senate swearing-in ceremony in 1993. Like her father, Frank, she became a leader in the state senate.

banking, and accounting. She explained, “While he was running [the farm] with the rest of the family, he also was one of those old-school type of government folks. He was town board chairman, he was county board chairman, and he was president pro tem of the senate . . . I think that really created the impetus to run for office because I saw him do it. He didn’t just talk about doing it, you saw how he did it.”

Representative Zamarripa also grew up with a politically active family. Her aunt, who helped raise her, was “very involved in the community and politics.” She continued:



Christine Sinicki

FINDING OUT SHE WAS RUNNING FOR THE LEGISLATURE

Women often must be encouraged by others or asked multiple times to run for public office. Representative Christine Sinicki was encouraged by her predecessor in the legislature in a very particular way.

“I spent eight years on the Milwaukee School Board, and then my predecessor [Representative Rosemary Potter] [decided] to retire from the legislature. And it’s kind of a

funny story, the way this all came about. At that time, I really had no intention of running for higher office. I really enjoyed what I was doing on the school board and [with] education. So I called her, and I said, ‘So, Rosemary, you got somebody in mind to run?’ ‘Yeah, don’t worry about it,’ she said, ‘We got somebody, don’t worry about it.’ A week later, I called her again, ‘So, who’s running?’ ‘Don’t worry about it. We’ve got somebody in mind, we’ve just got to pin her down.’ I said, ‘Okay, well, it’s a woman—is she pro-choice, pro-public education?’ ‘You’re going to love her.’ Okay. So a week later, she called me; she said, ‘Let’s have coffee.’ So I said, ‘Okay, fine.’ [I met] her for coffee and said, ‘Who’s running?’ And she looked at me and [said], ‘You are.’ And I said, ‘Um, no, I’m not.’ Then I thought about it for about a week and talked to my family—my husband and kids and my mom and my sisters. And my mom, at first, [said], ‘Oh no, no, you can’t do this, we need you on the school board.’ But I decided that with all that—that was right at the beginning of the voucher program, and there was so much debate around that—I knew the education debate was going to really be at the state level, so I decided I should jump in.”

[My aunt] kind of forced me to volunteer as a child, go with her to meetings and then volunteer on campaigns and the like. So as a young adult it became a force of habit for me. And she ran for office. I want to say, historically, she was probably one of the first Hispanic women to ever run for elected office in Wisconsin. She ran for a few different positions: alder, state representative—the same seat that I now hold—and I think maybe school board as well, but never successfully, unfortunately. But I saw that growing up, and so I always credit her for being a big influence in my career decisions.

Sometimes the influence of family came later; Representative Sargent explained how she was inspired to run for office after she became a mother:

I had actually just turned 40 years old and found out I was pregnant, and the world did not know that. I was thinking that I'm very busy doing all these other things. I'm happy with all my dreams. I'm a mom in my city. I'm doing things that I really care about. And I realized as my kids were feeling really frustrated that they needed to do . . . community service, and I was talking to them about stepping up and maybe doing something they thought would be good for the community as opposed to what I was asking them to do, and taking some initiative, and that they were going to reap the benefits by [doing community service]. I actually had one of those moments where all the blood rushed out of my face. And I [told myself], "Shoot I'm kind of acting like my elementary school children by telling people I'm not going to run for office because I'm already doing so much too." It just felt like a real parallel.

The knowledge that women legislators gained in their careers before entering office strongly affected their legislative service. Representative Rodriguez worked with Hispanic communities, including immigrant families and non-native English speakers.

I went to work for a nonprofit called Hispanics for School Choice. And that's where I kind of put a little bit of my experience as an immigrant and seeing my parents struggle to good use. I could relate to the families that the organization was involved [with]. The organization's focus was helping parents learn about the educational choices that were available in the city of Milwaukee. . . . I got to meet a lot of parents that I felt like were like my parents, who were lost, who didn't know how to navigate the system, where to go for assistance, what's available here in the United States if your child is falling behind, if they need other services.



Representative Jessie Rodriguez was born in El Salvador and used her experience to help other Hispanic families learn about the local school system.

Senator Johnson’s decision to run for office was motivated by her experience as a small business owner, which raised her awareness of community issues:

I decided that I [had] an interest in running for office once I started doing day care. I started seeing some of the struggles that my day care parents were going through, and how sometimes we have systems in place to protect or help our low-income families that just really don’t work, either because they’re underfunded or underutilized, or the families just

don’t have the education or the resources to actually get to where those programs are. . . . I found out that Tamara Grigsby was going to retire from the state legislature, and I was really scared. I was scared about what would happen to our low-income and working families if there wasn’t a voice there.

Senator Johnson went on to win the late Representative Grigsby’s seat, making advocacy for low-income families her legislative focus.

Like Senator Johnson, Senator Taylor became interested in political change at the start of her career, when her experience as a public defender exposed her to what she felt were flaws in the criminal justice system:

After becoming a lawyer and becoming a public defender, I saw the system was completely jacked up, to say it in really basic terms. Policies that were in place. The system that the public defender and the prosecutor had to deal with. There was just a need for some change, [especially] from a policy perspective. . . . And so the more that I learned about the state of our justice system, it screamed that I needed to go and try to help change policy. I did not want to be the state that leads [the nation in the] incarceration of African American men.

Nearly all of the women we spoke to had to be asked—often multiple times—to run for office. Senator Taylor admitted, “If I could be honest, I ran because I was asked.” Senator Taylor is not alone in being encouraged by others before deciding for herself to pursue public office. Though she was actively

involved in her community for many years via the Dairy Herd Improvement Association in Buffalo County, Senator Vinehout never considered running for public office until she was asked:

I was down here [in Madison] for some kind of hearing, and I was kind of recruited by the [Democrats] to come to a press conference they were having about health care. So I told my story and Lena Taylor came up to me, she's a brand new senator, and she said, "Oh my God, girl, you would make a fabulous senator, have you ever thought about running for the senate?" And [I said], "Oh, honey, that's way too much work. I can't possibly do that." As if farming full time wasn't way too much work. It took a couple years to

Senator Lena Taylor became interested in politics during her career as a public defender. Like many women, she had to be asked to run for office; Senator Taylor has, in turn, encouraged and asked other women, such as Senator Kathleen Vinehout, to run for statewide office.



JAY SALVO, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

dawn on me that this was a possibility. I never ever dreamed that I would be involved in politics, it's totally not my dream at all.

Several years after her conversation with Senator Taylor, and only after more encouragement from people in her community, Senator Vinehout decided to run for office. Senator Bewley described how she decided to run for office: “My kids are grown and living in Ashland, and somebody asked me to run for city council, and I said no. I didn’t see it. It’s like, why? No. I don’t run for office, other people run for office. Then it was like somebody had to ask me three times and then, boom. Why am I saying no? Oh yeah. It’s like the bumper sticker, you know, ‘Start seeing motorcycles.’ We don’t know what we don’t see until somebody says, ‘Hey, snap out of it. Look. Run for office.’ And then you go, ‘Oh, oh me, yeah, okay.’”

For many of the women, local government was a critical stepping stone to serving at the state level. About 56 percent of the women in the 2015 Wisconsin Legislature served in a local elected position before winning a seat in the legislature. All agreed that it was a valuable experience. Representative Janel Brandtjen served on her county board for several years before learning that her state representative was retiring and that he wanted to endorse her for his seat. She said, “At that point, you have to say to yourself, this is a tremendous opportunity to not just serve my community, but to serve [as a] legacy for my kids, and then also to impact your direct community. And why wouldn’t you take that opportunity? Wouldn’t you kick yourself for not saying, ‘Hey, I gave it a try to go out and make a difference in [my] community?’”

The campaign experience

Many women had little campaign experience before running for office, and their first campaign often proved the most difficult, introducing them to the rigors and rewards of campaigning. Former Senate President Lazich explained, “In the first campaign, you learn everything the hard way. You start walking,



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Though Senator Kathleen Vinehout was asked by others, including Senator Lena Taylor, to run for office, it took her years afterward to believe that a career in politics was a possibility for her.



Mary Williams

MEETING THE PUBLIC

Door-to-door campaigning is a vital activity for legislative candidates, letting them meet constituents and learn firsthand about issues in the community. But almost anything can happen out on the campaign trail, as former Representative Mary Williams can attest:

“There were some very interesting things along the way.

I did meet a naked felon. I knocked on a door and this guy opened [it]. He was a nice-looking young man, but he only showed his head . . . kind of peeking out. I told him who I was, and I said, ‘I’m running for the state assembly.’ And he said, ‘Huh?’ I said, ‘In Madison, the state assembly.’ ‘Okay.’ I said, ‘I want to talk to you a little bit, and I hope I can have your vote.’ He said, ‘I can’t vote.’ I said, ‘You can’t?’ He opens the door a little more, and I saw he didn’t have a shirt on. And okay, it’s hot out; it’s fall, and it’s hot. And he said, ‘I can’t vote. I’m a felon.’ I said, ‘Oh my goodness, you are?’ ‘Yeah.’ And well, he opens the door, and there you go. I said, ‘Well, it’s been nice speaking with you.’ I was going to say ‘seeing you,’ and I thought I’d better not say [that].

But then you have dogs. I always carry dog biscuits with me. I had a Rottweiler come after me. He broke the chain, and he came to a screeching halt right by me. I was between the house and the car. And I looked up, and I said, ‘You’re going to have to help me, because he’s going to kill me.’ And honestly, this is the strangest thing, it was like he was frozen. I looked at him, and he just looked at me, and I moved, and he kept looking straight ahead until I got up on the steps. And the lady came running out, ‘Oh my God, my dog broke loose.’ And I said, ‘I already met him.’”

and it’s raining, and you don’t have your umbrella. You step in a puddle and you’re soaking wet. And all of these dumb things [happen].” Representative Rodriguez said that “the first door that you knock on is the hardest. I think the first few doors you knock [on] are the hardest, because you don’t know what to expect, what kind of questions people are going to have for you. I didn’t know how to prepare for that.” Many women still needed the income from their day jobs and had to campaign around their work schedules. Senator Harsdorf recalled, “During that first campaign I was milking cows, doing chores, and farming from first thing in the morning until noon. Then, in the afternoon,

I would go out and campaign until dark.” Walking neighborhoods to meet constituents took its toll. Former Representative Mary Williams estimated that she lost 25 pounds during her first campaign; she wore out a brand new pair of tennis shoes and put “just thousands and thousands of miles” on her car.

This door-to-door campaigning, though exhausting, was the activity that the women credited the most for a successful campaign. Whether they were running for school board or state senator, women legislators consistently emphasized how much winning their elections depended upon making personal connections with constituents. This held especially true for legislators’ first campaigns, which were frequently for municipal offices such as alderperson or mayor. Through face-to-face discussions, women could tell voters their policy platforms and listen to the voters’ concerns. Former Senate President Lazich credited her first win to knocking on “every single door. . . I listened to their story. And all of that information, you put in your backpack and go home and do your homework.”

Even if they knocked on every door, women legislators commonly encountered failure before success. Former Senate Majority Leader Mary Panzer ran for the assembly in 1974 at the age of 21 and lost by only 81 votes. Losing a first campaign, and sometimes many subsequent campaigns, provided many of the women an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and mount a successful

Politicians seeking election to statewide office can cover thousands of miles on foot and by car while on the campaign trail. Door-to-door campaigning, appearances at parades, pancake breakfasts, meet-and-greets, and other local events keep the candidates on the go. Despite pounding the pavement, former Senator Mary Panzer lost her first election, but she continued to learn and work to gain the trust of her constituents.



future run. Representative Lisa Subeck explained that the first time she ran, “I went into it thinking that I was going to print some things on my computer, hand them out to my neighbors, and get elected. I think it was very eye-opening to me that in Madison, you have to raise a lot of money to be able to send a lot of mailings and be able to print literature, and you need to knock on thousands of doors. To me, that was all so brand new.” She concluded, “What that [first run] really did for me was open my eyes to how it all works and get me [to] that point where I was ready, next time, to run a strong campaign.”

Many women legislators found it challenging to master effective fundraising. Former Representative Williams said that fundraising “was the hardest thing for me to ever do. To sit down and call people and say, ‘Can you send me a \$500 check or a \$100 check?’—that was the most difficult thing for me.” Senator Johnson found that “it’s exceptionally expensive to run a campaign, and the issues that I’ve fought hardest on, that are nearest and dearest to my heart, the individuals that I fight for, they don’t have money to donate to a campaign.” And while she acknowledged that fundraising is crucial to running a campaign, she said, “You have to find a way to make sure that you’re raising the type of funds that are true to your values.”

Many of the women’s early campaigns were small and inexpensive, but expenses tended to amplify over time or when seeking higher office. Senator Janis Ringhand recalled her first campaign for city council: “You really didn’t

Representative Lisa Subeck says that her first campaign for local office in Madison was “eye-opening” but ultimately led her to be ready to run a strong campaign the next time.



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raise any money, you just didn’t have to. I think if you spent less than \$200, you didn’t even have to do a financial report at the local level, so it was really low key. I put an ad in the local paper, had a couple of coffees—local restaurants, sort of meet-and-greets.” Former Senate Majority Leader Robson recalled that during her first campaign, “if I got a \$25 donation I thought I died and went to heaven; I thought it was just fantastic.” She said the budget for her first campaign for the assembly was around \$1,000. But by the time of her final campaign, “I think at the end, we were spending nearly

fifty, sixty, seventy thousand dollars. We were up on the radio; we were putting up big glossy fliers; I was on cable TV. It was really almost entirely different from the first campaign, which was small, personal, doing doors.”

Some women who served as volunteers or support staff for other candidates’ campaigns started their own first campaigns with more knowledge of the issues and the election process. “But it’s different being the candidate,” Representative Billings remarked. “It’s a little more lonely, even though you are surrounded by people. You’re the person who’s running for office at the door, asking for money. And you don’t want to disappoint everyone and lose. That’s what makes you wake up at three in the morning.” And whether or not they were successful, these first campaigns helped the legislators gain confidence, expertise, and contacts that were useful in subsequent campaigns. Representative Ballweg found that “there are a lot of the faithful standards that I can always go to now when it comes to putting up campaign signs and supporting me with fundraisers or going out and getting nomination papers, so there is a good core group that I can go back to on a regular basis. I think that’s the biggest advantage that an incumbent has. You just keep building on what you’ve done in years past.”

This type of support system proved crucial to winning campaigns. It was acknowledged by all legislators that although there is only one candidate, running for public office is a group effort. Senator Harsdorf said, “I learned very quickly, you don’t win a campaign alone. It takes a lot of people willing to invest their time and resources to be successful.” At the local level, this support group was often composed of the friends and family of the candidate, and they were often other women. Former Senator Rosenzweig said that the women in her community “worked themselves to the bone” on her campaigns. She told us that she formed lasting emotional bonds with these supporters, even if their political viewpoints later diverged. Former Senate Majority Leader Robson deployed a group of fellow nurses that she dubbed her “white shoe army.”

Once the women became candidates for statewide office, political party resources were usually available in addition to local group support. Many Democratic legislators received training from Emerge Wisconsin, part of a nationwide Democratic Party initiative focused on encouraging women to run for elected office. Many Republican women legislators mentioned attending candidate schools sponsored by the Republican Party and receiving assistance from the Republican Assembly Campaign Committee. These training programs helped the candidates master skills like public speaking, effective door-to-door campaigning, and fundraising.

Time in office

The prevailing opinion of women legislators is that the legislative environment has dramatically changed for the better. With exceptions, younger legislators described more equal treatment than those who served in past decades, and long-serving women legislators seemed to find that their gender mattered less as they gained seniority. However, most of the women did describe instances in which they were treated differently than their male colleagues.

In past decades, there were few women legislators. Former Senator Lorman recalled that when she took office in 1979, she was the first woman in the Senate Republican Caucus. When she walked into the room, “These guys were sitting around the conference table with their feet up, smoking cigars.” She stood in the doorway, she said, and “didn’t know what to do. They just sort of looked up, and Rod Johnston . . . he was a very nice guy, [and] he said, ‘You must be our newest member. Come on in. Grab a chair.’ That was my welcome.” The capitol building at the time reflected the rarity of women legislators. Former Senate Majority Leader Robson recalled that when she was elected to the primarily male assembly in 1987, women “really didn’t have a bathroom next to the assembly chambers, we had a converted janitor closet. Which was not befitting of all the marble and the gold and the red velvet and all the rest of that stuff.” She interpreted this lack of facilities as being “because women weren’t supposed to be there, or weren’t ever going to be there.” She explained that while it “seems like a trite example . . . it does sort of cement [or] underline the culture of ‘It was a man’s world.’ So being in politics was really considered to be a man’s business.”

As more women became legislators, attitudes changed. Over the years, women gained seniority and status. Representative Pope explained how the length of her incumbency has affected her interactions with her colleagues:

Here’s the truth of it. At 66, gender stops being much of an issue for people my age. I think it’s more of an issue for the younger women. And that may sound silly. But maybe it’s the fact that I’ve been here for 14 years . . . you just garner a little more respect from people who are new, just because you’ve been here a lot longer than they have. But the sexism, I don’t think that applies so much to people like me. We’ve let our personalities out of the bag, and they know that we don’t take off—that if we have a strong opinion, you’re going to hear it.

Senator Vinehout has seen firsthand how attitudes toward women in leadership have changed during her tenure. When she took office in 2007, there



Jill Billings

USING HUMOR

Many women legislators, like Representative Jill Billings, use humor to address attitudes about women:

“When I was running for office, a reporter wrote a story about a debate that we did. It talked about me walking in; it was a male, who was a Republican, running against me, a female who was a Democrat. And she talked [about] me walking in with a bright blue jacket

and dark pants—didn’t mention what he wore at all, but mentioned what I wore. Sometimes you deal with that just by pointing it out. I said, ‘Would you ever ask the representative in the next district, my male companion, would you ever comment on what he was wearing?’ And humor helps, because I kind of chuckle when I say it. If I can point things out with humor, that helps people accept it. I can give you an example. When you step into the shoes of the representative, it’s no longer as much about you, it’s about who you represent and the office you hold. I’m a pretty comfortable, relaxed person, but in the building, I don’t correct people when they call me Representative Billings. I don’t say, ‘No, call me Jill,’ I accept that. And there is staff that is told, ‘You will refer to people as “Representative.”’ So, I was riding up in the elevator with some people from the [chief] clerk’s office—young people. The doors opened, and a lobbyist that I knew from before I became a representative looked at me and said ‘Good morning, Gorgeous!’ And you heard an ‘Uhhhhh’ in the elevator. And I pointed to him and said, ‘That’s Representative Gorgeous to you.’ Now, that has not caught on. It’s Representative Billings [*laughter*]. I had some people in my home district that called me Representative Gorgeous after I told that story. (Later on, [the lobbyist] said, ‘Yeah, I’m sorry about that.’) I think you can point things out with humor and help change behavior [for the] better, or often in a way that works.”

were three other women in her caucus, including the senate majority leader. But by the end of October that year, the entire senate leadership was men. “What kinds of things happened? There were several older gentlemen who are no longer with us in the senate, who were very outspoken. They dominated the conversation; they cut off the women senators; they demeaned them; and they incessantly told sexist jokes in the caucus.” However, after more women

joined the caucus and attained leadership positions, the internal dynamics of the caucus changed. Vinehout observed, “The answer to changing it is simple: you have to get more women in office.”

Women who began their legislative tenures more recently have served with more women and generally described different relationships with the men with whom they work. “I certainly feel that I’ve been treated the same as any male colleague,” said Representative Ballweg. Representative Nancy VanderMeer believes she has been treated equally, but contends that women legislators still need to have “that enthusiasm and that momentum to continue to represent ourselves . . . create that awareness, let people know we’re here.” But many of the women still described witnessing or experiencing different



Representative Chris Taylor once had a male colleague point out biased behavior to her in a committee meeting. She didn’t recognize it at first, saying “I think you get used to it . . . You just keep going.”

treatment based on gender. Sometimes it was fairly explicit, and even noticed by men in the room: Representative Taylor recalled when a male coworker sitting next to her at a committee meeting pointed out behavior that he thought was biased.

“It was very interesting—it took my male colleague to say to me, ‘You know, there’s a lot of sexism going on here.’ . . . I think you get used to it and you just don’t respond to it. You just keep going.” Representative Subeck told of her experience when one of her colleagues introduced her to another legislator: “He turned to him and said, ‘Have you met Lisa Subeck yet?’ Zach, who’s my staff, was standing next to me, and this

legislator looks at me and then looks over at him and says, ‘Oh, do you work for him?’ And I said, ‘No, this is my legislative aide, Zach.’ The look on Zach’s face was priceless, too. And the guy actually goes, ‘Oh, so you work for her,’ like this was some mystery. So, when people say, ‘Do you get treated differently?’ Yes.”

The women’s experience with gender bias was not always glaring. “I think there are biases, but they’re subtle,” explained Representative Billings. “I think that’s what’s happened as women are in positions of power or leadership. I think we still see sexism and sexism in our society as a whole. It’s just often



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Former Senator Nikiya Harris Dodd, shown here at a committee meeting in 2015, says she was sometimes made to feel that she wasn't smart enough to be in office because she was a woman.

not as blatant." Former Senator Harris Dodd explained that she was made to feel that, as a woman, she wasn't smart enough, and people "minimized what [her] value was to the process." Representative Sargent told of being in meetings during which women were "talked over in a way that men aren't talked over."

Senator Taylor remembered saying something, then having one of her male colleagues offer the same suggestion: "And then [another] male colleague said it after that, and it sounded brilliant the third time. But the first time, they didn't understand what the heck I was talking about." Representative Stuck, who is 34 years old, said, "Being a younger woman, I've not felt a whole lot of discrimination in the workplace. I always feel like I've been paid pretty fairly, treated pretty fairly. But I would say, this is an interesting experience, to definitely walk in and sort of be dismissed sometimes when you're the only woman, or maybe one of two women, in a room full of men, on a committee, or on the floor where you're in a smaller group where . . . the men sort of just talk around you instead of including you."

Women legislators' interactions with some members of the public often revealed biases different from those sometimes displayed in interactions with their colleagues. Representative Sinicki explained that in her experience, "There is a great deal of respect by other legislators for everybody. I think whether you're



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Representative Amanda Stuck has experienced a more equal working environment in today's legislature. "I always feel like I've been paid pretty fairly, treated pretty fairly," she said.

a man or a woman, you ran for the seat; you got the votes that were needed; you worked for the seat and I think they do treat you with lots of respect in that way." However, she has also had members of the public arrive at her office to talk to "him." She described it as "just kind of odd at first. People were saying, 'Well, is he here?' I'm like, 'I'm here. Do you want to talk to me?'"

Many women legislators experienced a situation in which a member of the public approached them expecting the legislator to be a man rather than a woman. Former Senate Majority Leader Robson observed, "If I were chairing a meeting, and I was sitting there, and I had a male clerk next to me, people that would come

in from the public would assume that the male clerk was the leader or was the chair of the committee." While Robson said that assumption was disconcerting, she commented that others at the meeting often intervened on her behalf: "Usually the staff is so good, they'll say, 'This is Chairman Robson,' and then [the person making the assumption would] be real embarrassed."

Assembly Assistant Minority Leader Katrina Shankland, who is 29 years old, is frequently asked, "Are you just staff?" She responds, "First of all, staff is extremely valuable, so please never say 'just.' And secondly, I'm the legislator. They'll [ask], 'Whose office are you with?' And I'll say my name. '[You] work for her?' And [I say], 'No, I am her.' So you wonder how many decades it's going to take before people accept that . . . I feel like there's a learning curve for people who just are not used to young women holding leadership positions." Representative Stuck recounted similar experiences when lobbyists and members of the public look at and talk to her male staffer during meetings, "even though I'm the representative. I often feel like, well, he's my staff person, [but] I make the decisions, so you should be talking to me and asking me questions."

Serving as a woman in office

Some women legislators do not think they need to do their job differently from men. When asked if she felt such a need, Representative Hesselbein replied, "No. I never felt that way." Representative Felzkowski attributed her



**Samantha
Kerkman**

WHEN HOME AND WORK LIFE COLLIDE

For some women in the legislature, particularly young mothers, a balance between home life and work life is challenging. Representative Samantha Kerkman recalled the times she faced this dilemma:

“I just remember one of the boys was really sick one night, and it was cold out; [he was] probably three months old. Representative [John] Ainsworth and [I] were in the back, and this was when session nights ran really late all the time, consistently. We were here until one, two o’clock in the morning. I was in the back with the baby; I had the visor up and the baby was sleeping. And Representative Ainsworth pulled it down. I remember jumping up off the couch and [saying] ‘If you wake this child up!’

Plus, then, I parked across the street, and I remember [someone said], ‘Oh, you can park over in GEF 1 building. It’s probably better for you.’ But then hauling everything back every night was—which you just do, because you love the kids, and I would not change my job. [People said], ‘You didn’t take any time off?’ I said, ‘No.’ I missed one week of session. There were a lot of helping hands around, too; they would help if the baby was crying on the floor. I think about that today. There were a couple times when the baby was crying really late at night. I pulled him into the side office over there, and I just couldn’t get him to calm down. And do I bring him out onto the floor and make it louder to try to get off the floor with him? And you think at that moment, ‘Oh my gosh, the world is—everybody is—paying attention.’ But everyone has been in those shoes.”



Representative Samantha Kerkman with her sons, Ian and Evan, in 2016. Since infancy, both of her sons have made appearances with Kerkman on the assembly floor.

success in office to her “strong personality” and didn’t think that she had to work harder than her male colleagues. Representative Kerkman characterized her approach as “working smarter,” which includes having patience with the pace of the legislative process and continuing to work with her colleagues.

Other women legislators, however, believed that they had to compensate for work opportunities that were missed when family took priority. This challenge was greater for those who had to travel long distances to attend committee hearings and legislative sessions. When Senator Taylor joined the legislature, she was a single parent with a young child at home. She had support from her family, but she still had to find the balance between her official duties and her family obligations: “I was commuting, unlike most people who would stay [in Madison], and I would say that it probably was draining on my relationships in the legislature. I probably could have more relationships. Even though I’ve accomplished a lot, I probably could’ve accomplished even more if I could’ve stayed and [done] lunch, coffee, dinner, [and] drinks with my colleagues. But instead, I’m on the road driving back [to Milwaukee].” Representative Ballweg added: “I think one of the things that is different in what I’ve done is because I’m traveling back and forth every night. I’m not here to go out to eat and have those after-hours conversations that sometimes aid in building those relationships. And because my family was a little bit younger, and I’m only an hour away, I wanted to get home every night as much as possible. So, from that standpoint, it’s a little bit of a different dynamic.” Former Senator Lorman explained that her situation was challenging because she was widowed, and she always wanted her child to come first: “I think that’s different for men because, if there’s a spouse, you can call your spouse and say, ‘Could you go pick him up or go to the meeting?’ Things like that. And I didn’t have a spouse then, I was widowed. And so [my son] came first. That made a difference. So I didn’t go out for dinner with the guys. I mean, most people don’t go home at five. They go out to dinner; they go to the bar; they’ve got apartments. I didn’t have that, so I never got really very close to anybody.”

Many other women legislators believed that they had to work harder than their male colleagues because they saw their work as somehow representative of all women in office. Former Assembly Majority Leader Pat Strachota described her efforts: “I didn’t let my gender have an impact . . . If I perceived that somebody would—felt that my gender had an impact, I would rise. I would work harder to show them that it wasn’t—it had no impact. I think that’s the pressure.” Some women described feeling like they had something to prove, regardless of whether that feeling was warranted. Representative Meyers said,

“Yes. Women definitely work hard. And it’s maybe self-inflicted sometimes. Maybe we do the best job, but we’re always trying to do a little bit better because we think someone is behind us going, ‘Oh yeah, she’s a woman.’ I think that is on all of our minds. Maybe I shouldn’t speak for women in general, but it is on my mind. You walk into a room, and you’re the only woman in the room. Yeah, you better pull your weight and somebody else’s, too.”

Some women did not believe that they had to work harder but that they needed to adopt a different, more collaborative approach to get results. In looking back on her legislative service, former Senator Robson recalled, “If I’m asked about what the difference is between men leaders and women leaders, I would say . . . that women legislators tend to be more consensus building, that they try to be more inclusive, that they try to build on the issue, not necessarily on the person. They give up their ego, so to speak, and they want the issue to win . . . so that means that, I think, you can get a lot more done. I did that when I was the leader.” Representative VanderMeer explained that, when she authored a bill about which she felt very strongly, “instead of just putting out my co-sponsorship on an email, I went to visit as many of my legislators here in the building that I could. A lot like doing doors. It’s that face-to-face and sharing that enthusiasm that I can’t really put on a piece of paper.” Senator Ringhand added, “I think women are just, in general, a little more diplomatic about how they approach some of the issues.”

Representative Brandtjen echoed this belief, saying that “as a female legislator . . . you’re probably a little more comfortable working together as a team to find that success. And I think women are more team-directed, or team-angled, and working towards making that happen.” Representative Ballweg agreed, explaining that she sees that “women are more—in many cases—[interested] in working at consensus building, sometimes, than the gentlemen . . . you know, making personal contacts, phone calls to members, visiting their offices, communication, and trying to explain what the proposal is, things like that.” Former Senator Lassa explained:

I think women are much more willing to sit down and come up with a solution that works for people. Whereas I think sometimes men can get dug in on an issue and not—compromise has become a dirty word in government. But I think in all of our relationships, whether you’re married or you’re involved with a significant other or you’re just part of a family, no one gets their way all the time. You don’t. And that doesn’t happen at work either. But I think women are much more willing to sit down and see where they

can find some common ground and come up with a solution that works for people, and sometimes men are more reticent to do that.

Particular perspectives

Women legislators generally agreed that they brought a different perspective to the legislature by virtue of their life experiences. “I think everyone brings a unique voice; I think everyone has a story to tell,” said Representative Hesselbein. Representative Pope noted, “I think it is important that people understand women bring a different perspective to law-making that men may or may not have.” Many women expressed that a plurality of views is what gives representation its depth. Senator Bewley explained, “I think that we bring to our roles whatever parts of ourselves we use as a frame of reference. And I can’t help but know that my lens is a female lens. I’m a woman; I have a woman’s eyes; and so I’m looking through a woman’s eyes. But I try to acknowledge that as long as everybody is aware of the fact that they all have different lenses, and we respect each other’s points of view, that we end up with the right vision—total vision—we’re okay.”

Representative Bernier agreed, saying that “a woman’s perspective is going to be a little bit different than a man’s. And I think the balance is good. No

Representative Kathy Bernier of Lake Hallie visits one of the grade schools in her district. She believes that every aspect of life, including government, benefits from having both male and female perspectives.



matter what aspect of life—whether it’s the legislature or a business or an industry or whatever, whatever realm that you live in or work in—to have male and female perspectives is important.” Representative Meyers echoed, “I can’t bring the exact perspective [a man] would bring to a conversation, and I think we need to make sure that we have both sides to the conversation.”

The women did not all agree that gender was significant in shaping their perspective. As Senator Vukmir said, “I’ve never really subscribed to the notion that being a woman in politics is different than being a man.” However, those who did think that gender was significant explained why. For example, Representative Meyers expressed the belief that women have “a compassion—as mothers, as wives, as women—that we can bring to a situation that a man just can’t, and vice versa.” Representative Taylor found that being a mother affected the types of issues on which she focuses, saying, “The issue of gun violence has become one of the top things for me because I’m worried about my kids. So I bring that perspective, I think, that a mother brings. I’m a mom first, and so that is always my first inclination as to how to improve the lives of children and how to keep them safe. So, as a mother and working parent, I think I have a perspective that a lot of people don’t have.”

To Senator Jennifer Shilling of La Crosse, a woman’s perspective is essential when the legislature discusses issues such as reproductive health.



JAY SALVO, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Other women believed that, when the legislature debated certain issues, a woman’s perspective was essential to finding the best solution. Senator Shilling noted that, when it comes to an issue like women’s reproductive health, “there is one gender that knows a little bit more personally than the other one.” She explained that when the legislature considers those issues, it’s important for women to be part of the conversation: “[U.S. Senator] Tammy Baldwin always says, if you’re not in the room, they talk about you. If you’re in the room, they talk to you. We all bring different experiences that shape us.” She added, “I think we are a richer legislature when we have people from all walks of life that run and serve.”

The women legislators generally

concurred that their perspectives were shaped by more than their gender; many other influences and experiences make up their identities. As the first and only Republican representative who is Hispanic, Representative Rodriguez noted, “I bring a unique perspective [because] I come from an immigrant background, so poverty, knowledge of the community, knowledge of cultural values and ideas. And so [my colleagues] look upon me to be that voice for them, to help them understand and garner information.” She observed, “The funny thing is that when I was elected, I wasn’t running as a ‘Hispanic’ Republican, and that wasn’t my focus. When I ran, I wanted to represent my community, [which] is predominantly white.” Experiences in office changed her mind: “Although I didn’t expect that I needed to be that voice, I feel like I have to now, because I’m there.” Former Senator Lorman, when asked if she, as a woman, had a perspective that the legislature otherwise would have lacked, answered, “Probably to some extent, and maybe influenced by the fact that I came from an immigrant background. Maybe because I’m Jewish. Maybe because I was widowed; I had more responsibility for family-raising than some people. I can’t say that it was just being a woman.” Senator Johnson, who identifies as African American, said that in addition to her gender, “to a large degree, I actually think my color helps me here at the capitol . . . I think I’m able to bring perspectives to the table that other people may not be able to see. It has helped a lot with some of the legislation that I’ve been able to pass.”

Representative Sargent spoke about growing up in a family that did not have a lot of money and learning how to grocery shop with food stamps as a young girl. She explained, “I think that makes me unique. I don’t know that there’s a lot of people in this building that have had that experience. And I think it’s really important that our legislature is made up of different perspectives and different realities.” Senator Taylor described her unique lens:

I know I bring something different to the table. It means something to be a child whose parents divorced. I can speak to that in a way [that] somebody who has walked in those [shoes] can speak. I can speak about being a single parent and the challenges that exist. I know what it is to be an entrepreneur and have a startup. I know what it is to hire people and have to fire people. It’s not easy to do those things. I understand the story of the mother who is raising a black boy in America, let alone in Milwaukee in the state of Wisconsin.

She added, “When I am the only person of color to walk in a room, my mere presence brings something different.”

All of the women agreed that the legislature is a better and more effective body when more perspectives and experiences are represented. Representative Billings captured this sentiment, noting, “I’m a believer of having a lot of different voices at the table. And I think you’re better representatives, you’re a better governing body, if you have those varied voices at the table.”

Particular concerns

One problem commonly experienced by many women legislators was the attention paid to their clothing and appearance. “I think women just are held to a higher standard,” said Representative Shankland. Some found the lack of consensus on what constitutes women’s business wear to be problematic. “Men have a pretty basic uniform,” said Representative Billings. Representative Ballweg agreed, noting that “when we put in a more formal dress code here at the legislature, it was easy to say that gentlemen need to wear a coat and a tie to be recognized on the floor, but it was impossible to come up with a definition of what professional dress is for ladies.”

Representative Billings added that women “kind of have to find a female version of the male suit.” The rules, it seems, are endless: “Your hemline has to be so low. You can’t show cleavage. The type of jewelry you wear cannot be

The Republican women of the 2015 legislature. Many women legislators described the difficulty of establishing a professional dress code for themselves, knowing that they may be judged more harshly than their male colleagues for their choice of wardrobe.



JAY SALVO, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER



Mary Lazich

COMMUNICATING WITH CONSTITUENTS

Until the mid-1990s, constituents and candidates for office had three ways to communicate with each other: phone call, letter writing, or personal visit. Since the introduction of email and social media, the pace of communication has become much faster and larger in volume, as former Senate President Mary Lazich relates:

“When I first ran, it was all about the doors. Doors, doors, doors. And I still think it is today. But when I ran, it was still the dinosaur age of communications. Email didn’t exist back then. We were letter writing. When I came in, in 1993, we wrote letters, and letters were the main form of communication. We had 800 numbers, so some people called us. Cell phones were first coming on. I had this big, huge bag phone that you had in your car. You didn’t carry cell phones around. But it was very, very different then. So the letters came in, and then people had to sit down at home and write a letter, and put a stamp on it, and address it. So you didn’t get as much communication. These letters came in each day, and staff would help you, and you’d do research, and you would write back to people. It was U.S. Mail back and forth. But when email came . . . [and] people became more savvy . . . [The Joint] Finance Committee, my gosh, we got 500 emails a day. There’s just no way to keep up with that. Just no way. And then with TV, everything’s very instantaneous. It’s just immensely different. It’s so different. And the campaigns, then, are immensely different because of the communications, too.”

too flashy. You shouldn’t wear sleeveless outfits. You shouldn’t wear open-toed shoes.” She did, however, explain why some of these limitations make sense: “If what you want as a representative of a district is for people to hear your words, you want them to hear your message. And if you’re wearing low cleavage or a short, short skirt, or a wild pattern or crazy jewelry, are they listening to your message or are they saying, ‘That jewelry is interesting?’ You want them to hear your words, so you want them to focus on that and not what you’re wearing.”

A second problem mentioned by women legislators is the harassment some have faced online. Many women noted that social media has been an effective way for them to communicate with the public and their constituents: “It’s an important part of any campaign, or even from the official office, in terms of

just getting your message out and letting people know what you're doing," said Representative Stuck. However, social media also opened a new avenue for a type of negative, and often anonymous, comment that is directed primarily at women. Some women legislators, like Representative Pope, address negative online comments by simply avoiding social media altogether or delegating to their staff the tasks of updating their Facebook pages and monitoring their online presence. Others contend that the best way to handle the problem is to ignore it. "You have to be prepared that some people are incredibly amazing to you, and other people are going to tell you everything you don't need to know about yourself," said Representative Brandtjen. She advised: "Grow your alligator skin, and get comfortable in your skin, and be willing to step forward, head high, and be that voice for your community."

Public focus on women's appearance and the online harassment experienced by some women legislators are closely tied. Senator Shilling said that she sometimes receives negative comments about her appearance on social media. She explained, "I've never seen them say that against my male colleagues. . . . People will take these pot shots at women legislators and our looks and our appearance and things like that." Representative Billings related the following experience: "I did a press release the day I co-chaired my first committee meeting, and I had a picture on my Facebook page. And one of my media people called me and commented on the clothes that I wore." "Being a public official means that you're in the public eye and that you're a target of negative comments—gender, sexist comments," said Representative Shankland. However, she explained that it's important not to be silenced by bad online behavior: "It's so easy to get mad at these stupid comments from people who call you terrible words for believing in voting rights or whatever simple thing that you're advocating for at the time, like tax fairness. These comments come out at the weirdest times, and I just started calling them out and saying, 'This is what happens when women are in office.'"

Mentorship

Mentoring in the legislature can echo through many legislative careers. The current woman legislator who was named most frequently as a mentor was Representative Ballweg. For example, Representative Cindi Duchow said that Representative Ballweg was the first person to welcome her to the Assembly, and Representative Bernier referred to her as "the best mentor in the whole wide world." Representative Ballweg, in turn, talked about the importance of the formal mentoring program in the assembly:



JAY SALVO, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Representative Joan Ballweg (*left*), shown with fellow representative Cindi Duchow, has been named by many of her fellow legislators as a mentor to them. Mentorship in the legislature can span many sessions and impart procedural and historical knowledge, as well as provide an important social aspect for many members.

We had a good system of formalized mentors in our caucus, and that was someone who would kind of help you out, tell you how things worked . . . They would sit you on the [assembly] floor next to that person. And in my particular case, it was Jean Hundertmark, who actually was in the district next to mine, so it was [a] very similar type of constituency, and she was coming from a very similar place in that we had kids about the same age and things like that, although she'd been in the legislature for



Alberta Darling

MILKSHAKE MENTOR

Senator Alberta Darling connected with her first mentor over an invitation to have a milkshake: "I was really lucky that I met Mary Panzer my first day in the legislature. She asked me if I wanted a milkshake. I thought that was very undignified. [*laughter*] You could eat things on the floor in the assembly, and I thought, 'I've worked this hard to have someone ask me if I want a milkshake?'

But we became fast friends, and she was a terrific mentor, because she was very reasonable, very bright, very committed to service, and came from a family of individuals very committed to public service. She was a great mentor."

several terms at that point. She was someone that I could talk to and not feel foolish [asking] about what’s happening with floor procedure and those kinds of things. Our caucus has tried to keep that going, and I’ve served as mentor for someone most every term, a couple of gentlemen and a couple of ladies also—tried to do the same thing that Jean did for me.

As for less formal mentoring, Representative Ballweg said, “Informally, I think people, just like in any other organization, seek out folks that they think would have similar interests, similar backgrounds.”

All of the women who identified specific mentors agreed that a mentor was a valuable asset. Former Senate Majority Leader Robson remembered the mentorship of Representative Jeannette Bell. “She took us under her wing and she kind of showed us the way and the pitfalls, and also helped organize the women going out for lunch and dinner so we could just be friends and relate to each other and feel like you had some comfort with other women.” Robson added that when they were on the assembly floor and it felt a little hostile, “Jeannette always had your back.” Representative Brandtjen’s assigned mentor was Representative André Jacque. Brandtjen said having a mentor help with



Mary Lazich

FRESHMAN CHAOS

Former Senate President Lazich talked about when she was first elected to the assembly in 1992 in a class of 23 freshmen representatives, 9 of whom were women. Senator Lazich said she was fortunate to have been assigned a good mentor, “But we all wanted to know more about the rules, and how do we get things done?

What do we do on the floor? So [Representative and Minority Caucus Chair] Dave Deininger said, ‘Okay, let’s get together and I’ll help you with that.’ So we all went in, and we’re all bubbling over with questions, and he doesn’t really have a plan to teach us. And we walk out of there, and it was just more chaotic.” Deininger did leave them with one piece of advice, Lazich said: “Well, I’ll tell you what [Assembly Speaker] Tom Loftus told me when I came into the building: ‘There ain’t no rules and we don’t play fair.’ That was our induction. So I go back to my office, and I typed that out in great big letters and slapped it on the wall. And I was quickly told to take that down.”



JAY SALVO, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Representative Janel Brandtjen, vice chair of the Assembly Committee on Government Accountability and Oversight, confers with her fellow committee member Representative Tyler August, who is also Speaker Pro Tempore.

“making deadlines, making sure you understand how the different departments work, what they can provide and what they can’t provide, and where you go for the information they’re not providing, so all kinds of different ways to get information and how you can be successful about that” was “really helpful in getting [work] done.” Senator Ringhand said that Representative Pope had been her mentor during her campaign, and that Pope was helpful “because she understood some of the same things I was going through, struggling at home sometimes—I just wish I had an extra hour to do this or do that; she understood that.” Mentorship was especially helpful in each legislator’s freshman session. Former Senator Lassa said that her former boss, Representative Donald Hasenohrl, was her mentor. Because she had worked as Hasenohrl’s chief of staff, she felt pretty comfortable in the capitol when she was first elected. Of Hasenohrl, she said, “He was a really good mentor in helping think through some of the policy issues and providing a really good wealth of knowledge. Because there still is that transition. And when you’re first elected, there’s so much information coming at you that it’s really hard to take it all in and not to be overwhelmed.”

Women legislators faced varying degrees of difficulty in finding mentors. Some were set up formally with their mentors. Others said that they had no mentor or that they relied on more informal mentorship, learning from the legislators around them. Former Representative Williams said that the importance of having a mentor in the legislature “depends upon the woman.” She continued, “If you are the kind of person that can go and get all your own

answers and do all your own research and stuff, it's not quite as important."

Former Senator Harris Dodd discussed the mentoring dynamic she observed during her career: "There were some people who did try to take me under their wing, and there were some people that I kind of sought out. And so it was kind of this really interesting dynamic going on, where I just received some mentorship, and others I rejected based on what my experience with that person was." Senator Taylor explained that although she never had anybody say to her, "I'm going to be your mentor," she chose mentors for herself. "Marvin Pratt became a mentor because he was a neighbor. He was my alderman. He was the standard of what I thought service was . . . He could've told you when he met you what your issue was, what your address was. I call him the 'Rain Man of Politics.'"

Senator Johnson said her first mentor was former Representative Sandy Pasch, but that she doesn't have just one mentor. Instead, she said, "I have people that I watch. And, with that, you have to take it with a grain of salt. I have to separate the things that I don't like about them, but really concentrate and try to mimic the things that I do. So I would say that I have a lot of mentors here in the capitol." Many legislators learned from watching a seatmate on the floor. Former Representative Strachota said that back in 2004, she was paired with then-Representative Vukmir. Strachota remembered sitting on the assembly floor with Vukmir—whom she described as "a strong female representative"—and asking lots of questions. Former Senator Carol Roessler said, "My seatmate was Pat Goodrich, and from time to time, I would ask Pat questions. But as far as a mentor was concerned, no [I did not have one]. And that surely would have been helpful. But again, having Pat as my seatmate was fortunate because I could glean some information and thoughts and assistance from her." Other times, the women roomed together when the legislature was in session, which gave them the opportunity to find, as Senator Roessler described it, "a place for exchange and learning."

Senator Bewley said she has had no single mentor:

I am just enchanted by all the people in this building, and so I really count on different people for different things. But no, I do not have one person who sort of ushered me through. I don't want to say [mentoring] is relatively new, but a woman mentoring another woman, that didn't happen. If it happened, it was almost by accident, and you developed a relationship and then years later you realize, 'Oh, she was a mentor to me.' But now it is more common. And so I just see mentoring opportunities in everybody.

So I'll go to this person because I know that's what he knows and that's where he'll help me, or she is really good and very clear and very honest about that, and so I use people that way.

Representative Duchow mentioned she feels comfortable regularly calling and talking with other women legislators and that she can always rely on “the guys down the hall” in the capitol, referring to Representatives Tyler August, Michael Kuglitsch, Rob Swearingen, and Adam Neylon. Representative Shankland shared that “I always like to collect a few opinions of people I respect so that I have a myriad of ideas, and then I go with whatever I feel was right on the issue.”

Not all women legislators were mentored by women, and some found mentorship outside their own party. Representative Hesselbein was paired with Representative Nick Milroy because they were both on the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs, as well as the Natural Resources and Sporting Heritage committee:

It was really great that he is a hunter and a fisherman, and I am not, but I love the resources. I love the outdoors. I want to go on walks with my family just as I want a hunter to be able to hunt, so it was nice to be able to get his perspective on that as well. . . . I could call up Nick and say ‘There's this veterans' bill that I have.’ It wasn't going well and he gave me some ideas. And I took his ideas, and I was able to pass the bill into law. Very helpful.

Representative Dianne Hesselbein has been mentored by Representative Nick Milroy, her colleague and a co-member of two committees with her in 2015. Milroy was helpful in providing a different perspective for Hesselbein's proposals related to natural resources and veterans issues.



GREG ANDERSON, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER



Leah Vukmir

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Every legislator has a story about her first day in office and getting acclimated to the legislature. Senate Assistant Majority Leader Leah Vukmir, who began her legislative career in the assembly, remembers that on her first day she literally went back to basics.

“I said, ‘What in the world did I get myself into?’ There is no manual that really prepares you. You can go through an orientation—bless the hearts of those that try to orient us. You really have no clue until you get here. And I’m not afraid to admit, I admitted this before, that I sat down in my office, [which] was very empty and had dusty bookshelves that had nothing on [them], and there was a children’s cartoon book that we give out, *How a Bill Becomes a Law*. And I read it. Now, I did have a working knowledge, because I had come up here to the capitol, and I had been testifying and was involved in various pieces of legislation. But it was one of those chuckle moments where I looked at this, and I went, ‘Okay, this is what I’ve got.’ The rest was trial by fire, being thrown and thrust into situations, and learning as you go. But I’m a nurse, and we’re used to being in unpredictable environments. We’re used to having to be flexible. We’re used to having days that don’t run where everything happens at an exact time. So in many ways, my nursing background really prepared me very well.”



Senator Leah Vukmir has used her background in nursing and teaching to help her navigate the often whirlwind environment of the legislature.



GREG ANDERSON, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Representative Debra Kolste of Janesville (*left*), a Democrat, has teamed up with her Republican colleague Representative Amy Loudonbeck (*right*) to improve her proposals and get them through the legislative process.

Representative Kolste, a Democrat, found help across the aisle in Representative Loudonbeck. In talking about the challenges of her first year in the assembly, as a member of the minority party trying to write a bill that might pass, she said, “I did write a bill the first year for the nurse practitioners to be able to prescribe at free health clinics. And I teamed with Amy Loudonbeck, and she actually showed me how to make the bill much better. So I considered her counsel a lot. She was very helpful.” Another Democrat, Representative Billings, found assistance in Republican Senator Harsdorf, saying, “When you are in the minority, you have to find a Republican champion, and [Harsdorf] has helped me with legislation in the past two terms.”

Representative Felzkowski, when asked whether it is important for new women legislators to be paired with women mentors, replied, “No, I don’t think it matters.” Her mentor was Representative John Nygren, who had a similar background in the insurance business. Representative Subeck said, “We were asked who our first choices and second choices were and then paired up largely based on that. And my first choices, interestingly, were not women, and I don’t know that it’s because I didn’t want a woman, because certainly some of my not-first choices were women, but I think it was partly products of geography. I wanted somebody in Dane County and somebody who I didn’t know.”

On the question of whether it is important for women legislators to have women mentors, Representative Rodriguez responded, “Yes, and kind of no.” She clarified that for procedural questions, it doesn’t matter whether the mentor is a woman or a man. But she added, “Seeing a woman’s perspective on issues,



Barbara Ulichny

THE BABY BOOMER EXPERIENCE

Like many women of the Baby Boomer generation, former Senator Barbara Ulichny had her political consciousness raised while attending college and seeing the unrest of the 1968 riots in Chicago. She recalls growing up in a very religious and Republican family, but in the 1970s, she worked for George McGovern's campaign and also ran for Congress. She worked with various

groups to change Wisconsin's sexual assault and divorce laws, learning grassroots organizing and becoming familiar with the legislative process. She was elected to the assembly in 1978 and served in the legislature for 14 years. She remembers the many people who helped her become a better legislator:

"My mentor in politics was the late senator and justice Bill Bablitch, because he was our chief author of the sexual assault reform bill in the state senate, and he became my mentor in the process. I also learned a lot from women in the assembly, including Sheehan Donoghue, who was a Republican from Merrill, Wisconsin. I sat next to Midge Miller from Madison; I learned from her to read about and follow the opposition and not only to read about and research the points of view that you agreed with—[to] see what the 'other' side had to say about issues . . . Mary Lou Munts; she and I became friends. And Sharon Metz was my roommate in Madison—Sharon was from Green Bay, Wisconsin. But those were all people who were very impactful for me."

though, is really helpful. I see it a certain way and I talk to other females to see if they see it the same way. Even if we agree on certain things, we disagree on some other things, but they're there as a resource." Senator Ringhand added, "I think it was helpful having a woman mentor because they just understand some of the family side of things, because men wouldn't be as cognizant because they don't address it in the same way." Former Senate President Lazich agreed that women should serve as mentors to other women: "That's something that I'd certainly love to do in my retirement is to mentor young girls, young women, whatever the age, very young children to a women my own age, to be involved and to prepare them for and help them run for elections."

Like former Senate President Lazich, many of the women expressed interest in mentoring the next generation of public servants. Representative Billings

remembered encouraging another woman to run for the seat on the county board she had vacated to go to the assembly. The woman responded, “Oh, me? I don’t think I know enough about county issues.” Representative Billings said, “Neither does anybody else, and I think you can learn them. And I will be here to help you. That’s the other thing that helps: if you have women who help mentor, if you feel like you have that support system, then you want to do it.”

Representative Bernier said that young women considering going into politics need strong encouragement in the form of mentoring. She explained, “I want to reach out to women in greater Wisconsin to say, if you are city council, if you are county board, if you are school board, or you’re a woman serving at the local level, or if you’re a woman just interested, you’re just a community member interested in running for office, well, I’m here to help you. I’m here to encourage you, and I’m here to tell you how to make that happen. So, we need more mentors out there.”

Senator Johnson was unsure whether she had served as an official mentor to anyone but, she added, “I’m always giving my advice, whether it’s asked for or not, to some of the younger electeds, and that’s because I really want to see them succeed. Especially the individuals from Milwaukee, because I am so proud of Danny Riemer, Mandela Barnes, David Bowen—because these are young men, and for so long in politics, especially in Milwaukee, in order to get to the capitol you needed to be seasoned.” Representative Sinicki said, “I do get a lot of our freshmen coming to me, just to ask advice on how to get things done.” Her advice was, “What you need to do is just find your niche and run with it.”

Senator Shilling, in looking back over her time as Senate Democratic leader, said, “That is one thing I regret, that I didn’t do a better job or work with [the National Conference of State Legislatures] or another group for mentoring both in-the-building dynamics and personal life dynamics of how you blend, how you deal with colleagues, how you deal with lobbyists, how you deal with all of these pressures and all the glass balls we’re juggling.” She concluded, “Mentoring is very important, but it’s undervalued.”

Across the aisle

Many of the women legislators have worked across the aisle, but said it did not make much difference whether they were working with a man or a woman. Representative Hesselbein said, “There’s not a difference for me . . . I think it matters on the issue.” Representative Felzkowski agreed: “It’s more dictated by the issue.” Representative Sargent added, “I think that I work [as] well with

women on the other side of the aisle as I [work] with men on the other side of the aisle.” Representative Taylor mentioned that “[The] first person who I really worked closely with was [former Republican Representative] Gary Bies . . . [We] worked on a bill to require that police investigations, when there is an officer-involved death, [are] not led by the department where the officer works . . . I mean, I just love the guy. I would walk through water, walk through fire for him. I really would. And I don’t agree with him on a lot of issues. I mean, we don’t agree on a lot of things, but what I saw in Gary Bies was just a . . . very fierce advocate.” She went on to mention forming collaborative relationships across the aisle with both men and women, including Representatives Loudenbeck, Kerkman, Jeremy Thiesfeldt, Joel Kleefisch, and Tyler August. Apart from issue-based cooperation, some women acknowledged women legislators’ tendency to look out for each other in terms of safety and well-being. Representative Brandtjen said, “We do make sure: ‘Do you need a walk to your car?’ ‘Do you have a room tonight?’ ‘Do you need a pair of heels? Yours broke.’ For, I guess, some of the girl stuff, we do look out for each other more.” The legislators also found they could talk about motherhood; former Senator Lassa said, “It’s something that you can bond over, on life outside of work. Some of the mutual frustrations in terms of raising children and being a working mom and that type of thing.”

Many women noted how tough it has become to maintain genuine friendships with other legislators. Some legislators believed that this was a result of partisanship. Representative Sinicki discussed how socialization has changed in the time that she has been a legislator:

There is such a partisan feel at this time, in this building, that it’s very difficult to form those bonds because what I’ve seen happen now—you know, when I was first elected, you could debate on the floor all you wanted, you could fight, you could yell, you could debate, but once you walk off that floor, it’s over. And that doesn’t happen anymore. We don’t see a whole lot of socialization anymore. As women, we used to always get together. I had some very good friends on the other side of the aisle many years ago. But we just don’t see that anymore. It’s sad, but it’s true.

Others seconded Representative Sinicki’s observation that forming relationships across the aisle has not always been so difficult. A few of the legislators brought up former Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton’s efforts to form a women’s caucus. Former Senator Robson remembered:

It was very, very informal, the women’s caucus. I know that sometimes, if

we felt like we were going to be threatening to the men, we would say that we had a women's caucus. But when we were in the senate, Lieutenant Governor Barb Lawton tried mightily to put together a women's caucus, and she wanted it to be a bipartisan women's caucus. So she organized us for lunch, Republican and Democrat women, and we started meeting for lunch—there would be 25 or more of us that would meet for lunch. We would just talk about everything and nothing, you know, your kids, neighbor stuff, and not necessarily legislation.

Senator Vukmir noted that the events around passage of 2011 Wisconsin Act 10 affected bipartisan relationships:

Clearly, coming in and going to Act 10 with senators leaving, it was a very unprecedented time in our state's history, and you can imagine, then, the chilling effect that it had on relationships. And in the assembly, I had relationships with members on the other side of the aisle and in both houses. When that happened, it was just almost like divorce, so to speak. You know, you just are completely on separate sides of an issue, and it was very polarizing. And it took some time for that chill to go away. I'm happy to say that it has.

While many legislators did not think being a woman provided any significant difference in reaching across the aisle, a few observed that women have a different way of going about getting things done and that this can affect cooperation. Representative Shankland pointed to the federal government shutdown as an example, saying, "I think if anything, all the research that's been done about women in office has shown that they are more cooperative. If you just even look at bills or at Congress shutting down and then reopening because a coalition of women across both parties open[ed] the government, found a deal." She further discussed the ways she thinks that men and women work differently:

I think that—and there's a lot of research that shows this—women can work together in a way that men maybe don't. But I also think it goes the other way. An example: where does a lot of work get done in business? Whether it's insurance or law—on the golf course. How can women be included in that if they can't golf, right? I see that and get frustrated by it because I do think it cuts both ways and it's helpful that women can be allies to each other in the legislature—work across the aisle on key initiatives that support children and families, for example.

Increasing equality

Most of the women wanted to see more women in the legislature and in leadership positions. Representative Shankland observed, “Women being at the table can inform the conversation or change the conversation entirely.” Senator Bewley argued that “The leadership should be 51 percent women just because it’s simply accurate. When the demographics are accurately represented in leadership, things work better, because everyone is heard. . . . When that representation isn’t there, things fall apart.” However, while the women legislators wanted to see more women in office, many discouraged the idea of supporting women candidates blindly. Many of the women pointed out that having a diverse legislature encompasses more than just gender equality.

Representative Pope remarked that she wouldn’t support a particular candidate just because she is a woman, “because I don’t think gender really has that big [of an] influence.” Representative VanderMeer added, “I think it’s important that we elect the best candidate to represent us, the person that is going to help Wisconsin be the best state in the country. So whoever fulfills that mission should be in the House.” Senator Ringhand recalled that she had declined to support some women because she felt they were simply not good candidates, even though people expect her to endorse other women. She reasoned, “It isn’t easy; you do get criticized for it, but just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean she’s a good candidate. You really have to pay attention to what the end outcome would be, because I don’t want to saddle constituents with a bad choice, and I don’t want to support someone I don’t have confidence in.” Some women legislators wanted the focus to be on their actions, not their gender. Representative Brandtjen told us, “I’m not really comfortable labelling myself as a female legislator. I’m a legislator. All issues are women’s issues. All issues have importance.”

The majority of women believed that the Wisconsin Legislature benefits from having a variety of opinions and life experiences and that this encompasses much more than just being a woman. Senator Harsdorf shared that “There were some who suggested that I not run again because I had a baby. I’ve always felt that it’s important to not only encourage different [professions to be] represented, but it’s also important to allow people at different stages of their life to be able to serve. You don’t want to create a legislature where you can’t have people with young families able to serve.” She also emphasized the need for leadership to be representative of the different geographical parts of the state. Representative Zamarripa described being the only Hispanic member of her caucus: “We’ve never had a Latino state senator. Those things are



Senator Sheila Harsdorf, shown with Gene Lamere at the 2008 Governor's Fishing Opener, is a farmer, a legislator, and a mother and talks about the need for leadership to come from all types of backgrounds, whether familial, geographical, or professional.

not lost on me, and I feel . . . a sense of isolation, sometimes—not always.”

Gains from public service

Many of the women legislators admitted to being reserved before taking office, but found that as the duties of office forced them into the public arena, they grew more comfortable speaking their opinions. A consequence of performing in their new position was a boost in self-confidence. The more they carried out their public responsibilities and duties of office, the more assertive they became in their advocacy. Representative Zamarripa acknowledged, “I was an introvert—very, very shy growing up. I was not the fourth grader that knew they

were going to be president.” Former Senator Robson spoke about how bashful she was before taking public office, saying, “I used to be very shy. In fact, in high school I could barely speak. I would turn red, beet red; I would stumble; I would not be able to put a coherent sentence together.” Robson told us that after she entered public office, “I learned to be a much better speaker . . . to be a lot more confident. I’ve noticed that I can make decisions a lot quicker, that I can grasp a situation and figure out what the problem is and come up with some solutions.” Robson went on to say, “I think women tend to not realize how many skills they have until the occasion arises or they see the problem, and all [of] the sudden it comes into place.” Part of this newfound confidence is rooted in the legislators’ knowledge that once in office, they speak on behalf of the people who live in their district, not just themselves. Representative Zamarripa described “[knowing] that the influence I wield is not just to benefit myself but to benefit my community and my district, where I was born and raised, I feel a tremendous amount of pride.”

The opportunity to learn was another benefit legislators gained from their time in office. Representative Terese Berceau talked about the many roles a legislator plays, commenting, “You get a chance to be a teacher, a social worker, sometimes a star. You get to perform. If you’re intellectually curious, there’s a ton of interesting things to learn.” One of the things that makes serving in the legislature unique is the diversity of subject areas with which one becomes acquainted, and the legislators told us how their time in office both spurred and sated their intellectual curiosity. As Representative Stuck said, “You learn a lot about so many different issues because there’s so many things that come before you that you just don’t necessarily deal with in your normal life.” Former Senator Rosenzweig talked about how she was able to learn about “a whole wide world of things” and praised the state’s legislative service agencies in aiding her education, saying, “[T]he service agencies in this state were just phenomenal—I mean everything from [the Legislative Reference Bureau] to [the Legislative] Council, Fiscal Bureau, and finally even the Audit Bureau were just treasures [from] which I learned so much. So when there was an issue, I really got the full understanding of everything.”

Representative Kolste acknowledged how fortunate legislators are in the high quality of information they receive, saying, “I’ve learned more than I could ever share with anybody else. I think about pharmaceuticals in the waste water. Who else gets to go to a conference with experts and learn about pharmaceuticals in the waste water?” Representative Meyers talked about touring a plastics plant where they use robots to make medical molds and learning about barrels with cluster bombs in them that were dropped in Lake Superior during the Cold War; she asked, “Who knew I would be learning that type of stuff?” Representative Kerkman told us, “I have learned to ask a lot more questions, and that it’s okay to ask questions and not be afraid to question why.” Representative Felzkowski said, “One of the things that happens . . . when you get involved in public office, especially in the assembly, you are exposed to circumstances and issues and perspectives that you’ve never seen before. And I just think that that’s a blessing.”

Much of what these legislators have learned has been a product of their face-to-face interactions with their constituents. Senator Darling said, “Getting to meet a lot of nice people and getting to share with them, [by] being with them, some of their priorities and interests, I think that’s been the best part.” Representative Taylor expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “The best thing about my job is I get to meet amazing people. Like every day. There are amazing people all over the state, amazing people right in my community, that are



Face-to-face interaction with constituents is vital for any legislator to understand the needs of her community and to create opportunities for that community to thrive. (top) Representative Beth Meyers, shown at an event in Marengo, Wisconsin, spoke about the wealth of information she has been able to access by visiting areas around her district and the state. (above) By holding listening sessions in her district, Representative Mary Felzkowski has been exposed to new issues and perspectives she might never have encountered otherwise.

working every single day to bring about change, to improve our community, and I get to meet them, and I get to hear about what they're doing." Mastering these discussions highlights a skill that legislators said was a vital component of their job: the ability to listen. Former Representative Williams said, "I think I learned better how to communicate. But I turned into a real listener . . . I really listened when my constituents would have a problem. And constituents

had said that. ‘Just talk to Mary. She’ll listen.’” Former Senate President Lazich said, “I don’t believe that we’re sent here to be a legislator. I think we’re sent here to represent the constituents. And, to truly represent them, you have to listen to them—you have to know what’s important to them.”

Representative Shankland gained a sense of perspective from listening to the people she represents: “I can think of so many stories where people just started crying—grown men, old men, young women, teenagers—just a lot of stories. So that’s been, really, just potent and powerful and incredible.” Senator Johnson said, “Usually when people have issues, they always have solutions. And the best solutions aren’t going to come from here in the capitol because this is not reality. The best solutions for those situations are going to come from the community, and I think that’s the one perspective that I’ve learned.” Representative Sargent said she is drawn into her district so that she “can have those conversations and I hear those voices and hear the stories, and I can bring that back and figure out what is working and what is not working. And that’s actually where the legislation that I’ve passed has come from—conversations with people in my community. And that’s exciting and that makes me feel proud.”

Many of the women legislators said that they used these constituent interactions to determine what was needed in their districts so that they could use their office to provide assistance. Through public service, they gained the personal gratification one receives from helping others. A large facet of the job is helping constituents navigate the bureaucracy, what former Senator Lassa referred to as “constituent service.” She explained, “I think most people think that the main part of the job is coming up with new legislation, but actually what my staff and I spend most of our time focusing on is constituent service—if someone’s having an issue with one of the state agencies, or they need some sort of help where we act as their liaison in trying to find out what’s happening with the state agency.” Former Representative Strachota said, “With my constituents, I didn’t realize how, when individuals are having difficulties or having trouble navigating the system, how much you can advocate for them and help them through the system. That was very rewarding to me.” Senator Lassa referred to constituent service as the “real victories . . . that make you feel really good about the job you’re doing.” Senator Ringhand shared the following:

I think the biggest thing for me is when we’re able to help constituents—that’s really important. In fact, before you came in today, I had two women come in, and one is a constituent and the other was a member of Gilda’s

[Club]. I don't know if you're familiar with [Gilda's Club], but they help cancer victims, and my constituent is a cancer survivor. And she had a problem with her health insurance, and they got dropped, basically, because of a mix up in some payment, and so my staff was able to help her and get it straightened out with her husband's employer—got it all back on track—got their insurance back where it should be. She came in today to thank me and wanted a picture taken because she was so grateful, because the company told them it would take 60 days to straighten it all out; my staff intervened, [and] it was done in six days. So those are the rewarding moments, when things like that happen.

Finally, legislators said that they had gained a profound respect for the democratic process and a lasting appreciation of the complexity of the state and its people. Senator Shilling said, "I think I have gained an appreciation for ordinary people doing extraordinary things. I am inspired when I meet people who just are making a go of it, nothing really extraordinary about them, but they are doing extraordinary things." Representative Billings added, "When you think about it, there are only 99 of us [members of the 2015 assembly] in the state—this is a pretty incredible job." Representative Pope admitted, "This is the most frustrating job I've ever had. The most rewarding job I've ever had. The most interesting job I've ever had. And the job where I've felt like I was actually making a difference for people on a large scale." Representative Bernier said, "I've gained a feeling of satisfaction that I've been a part of something bigger than myself." Representative Brandtjen found that she has gained "an appreciation for the state, the different communities, of the different crops that they bring in, and the different specialties that they have, and the different places where they shine or maybe they have shortcomings—and probably a real appreciation for all the resources and all the jobs and all the people as far as the growth and development. It's just an amazing state." While reminiscing about her time in public office, former Senator Alice Clausing said, "I did have experiences that most people would have never had the opportunity to do. And as the memory fades as to the legislation and that kind of work, my memory still stays with the people and the things that I did for them and by them."

Advice to young women

Former Senator Harris Dodd recommended that "any woman who is considering a career in politics, at whatever level, my advice to them is to do it. Don't let anything hold you back. Don't let anyone tell you what you cannot

do. And do it fearlessly.” Many admitted, as Representative Rodriguez did, that “It is a difficult job, and it can be very demanding, and it can be high pressure.” But none expressed regrets about running for or serving in the legislature. Representative Rodriguez added, “Helping people, constituents, it’s awesome. It’s awesome to see someone thank you for what you’ve done for them and it’s gratifying . . . it’s giving back to your community, [and] if you really like your community and you want to see positive changes in the state, then this is the way to do it. This is the job that can help you get there.” Senator Bewley said she tells women who are interested in politics, “You will find a new world with new light and new opportunities and new things to learn that you never knew were there, and you will thrive.”



Amy Loudenbeck

INSPIRING BY EXAMPLE

Representative Amy Loudenbeck, whose mother was a chemist, understands how important it is for young women to be inspired by examples of women in leadership or nontraditional roles:

“Dianne Hesselbein and I both hosted a Girl Scouts leadership day here at the capitol a few weeks ago. She asked me to do it; she really wanted it to be bipartisan.

It’s a busy time, it’s all day on a Saturday, but I want to do that because I think it’s still really important to expose women to other women that are in positions of leadership or power, because maybe they don’t think of it as power in the best of ways. My mom, she wasn’t baking cookies for my birthday, but she would come in and do science experiments in the classroom for us. She took me to see Geraldine Ferraro speak when I was younger, not because [she] was a Democrat, but just because she was a woman who was going to be on the ballot for a major political party. So those were the kind of things—you want to make sure people have the opportunity to see a role model that maybe looks like them. I used to teach fire prevention. October is fire prevention [month], and so we used to go around to schools, and we’d get the letters back, ‘Thank you for coming to our school!’ . . . They just thought it was neat because they had never seen a fire fighter that was a woman. Whereas now you see a little more diversity, more gender representation on TV and things like that.”



Representative Amy Loudenbeck (*back row, left*) believes it is important for young women to see examples of women in leadership and makes time, even during her busiest periods, to meet with those young women in her community or at the capitol.

When discussing why fewer women than men pursue public office, several of the legislators suggested that women tend to believe that to be qualified to run, they need to have a wide breadth of knowledge and understanding of many topics. But as many women noted, this is not true; many legislators take advantage of the legislature's opportunities to learn about complex issues after they arrive in office. Representative Felzkowski said, "You can't always know everything about everything. Make sure you surround yourself with really good people. And if you don't know, that's okay. Tell people you don't know, but then you look into it. Don't try to have all the answers up front." Representative Bernier added, "I think women sometimes think, 'Well, you know, I have to know this, and I have to do that and whatever.' Men don't know it either. They're learning as they go. They don't know everything."

Representative Berceau advised, “If you think there’s something you want to do, just start doing it and you will learn through doing.” Many acknowledged the additional pressure women put on themselves in this regard. As Representative Shankland put it, “I’ve seen so many capable women, who do an outstanding job fighting for the average citizen of Wisconsin, turn it down because of fear that they weren’t qualified enough.”

The legislators also emphasized that women should not wait for the “perfect time” to jump into public service, because it might never come. Former Senator Lassa reflected, “For so many women, I think they decide, ‘Well, I want to raise my kids, and then there will be time for that.’ And I think that regardless, and for men as well, if you have the desire to [serve] and interest, and you want to give back, then maybe don’t wait. Because we need people’s perspectives regardless of [whether] there’s someone who’s younger or older and in-between, and that helps us make better policy. And I think that’s valuable.”

After encouraging women to run for office, many legislators went on to give advice on how to run an effective campaign. Legislators advised women to evaluate their beliefs and guiding principles before running for public office, in order to understand why they want to run. Representative Ballweg advised people to “know where you are, know what your goals are, know what you need to accomplish that.” Senator Vukmir added, “Have a strong understanding [of] what your guiding principles are, because you’ll be tested and pushed in many directions. And so if you have a firm set of what your principles are and if your people in your district elect you, meaning that they agree with that firm set of principles, then it’s your responsibility to act on those.” Representative Pope pointed out that candidates “just really need to know themselves and their inner core really well before they venture out to speak for 65,000 people.” Senator Johnson concurred: “You have to know what you’re running for. And you have to let that be your motivation. If I’m just running because I want to be in politics one day, that’s not going to be enough to win a seat. But if I’m running because there’s a serious issue that I want to address and I literally believe that the survival of my community and my family depends on it, you’re not going to lose that race.”

Other legislators offered practical advice on how to run a campaign, naming resources available to women candidates. A few that were cited include Emerge Wisconsin, Wisconsin Women in Government, and EMILY’s List. Representative Felzkowski also suggested, “Take all the speech and communication classes you can.” In addition to formal organizations, assistance can be found close to home. Representative Stuck suggested, “The best thing is to

really find people in the community who are already doing it, other women who are already elected or have been elected in the past and get to know them and learn from them.”

Another common piece of advice was that experience in local politics is an advantage when running for state office. Many noted that such experience gave them a good introduction to what running a campaign and being an elected official entailed. Some also pointed out that involvement in one’s local community can lead to valuable relationships and resources that are helpful when running a state campaign. Representative Stuck advised:

Just getting involved in the community so you really understand the issues. I’ve done everything from volunteering at animal shelters to volunteering in my kids’ schools to serving on boards in the community. That really gave me a good sense of what was going on in the community so that when it came time to run I had connections, first of all—I knew people in the community—but I also knew what was going on, what people were worried about, so when I showed up at their door, I knew how to respond. I knew how to talk to people about what was going on because [of] having been involved.

Representative Billings agreed:

Look at local office; starting on [the] school board, county board, city council, is great experience for this job, because you learn about so many issues and you learn about simple things like parliamentary procedure and advocating for people in your district—and your district is smaller. I encourage [women] to run for local office and feel like they can get a taste for knocking on doors and all of that. If they enjoy that, then think about the next step. And also, local office is so important . . . I would say, just be involved in your community. Learn about what’s important in your community. Learn about the culture of your community, the history of your community. What kind of people live there? What makes your community run? And then, don’t

Representative Jill Billings, shown in 2011 in her home district of La Crosse, encourages young women to run for local office to experience not only campaigning but also the day-to-day procedures of holding office itself.



be afraid to jump in. If that's what you want to do, don't be afraid to jump in. You're as good as anybody else.

Every woman legislator had positive advice for young women thinking about pursuing public office. They encouraged women to not let anything hold them back and to believe in themselves: to believe that they are qualified enough and smart enough, have enough life experience, and have something valuable to offer. Senator Darling stated: "We have one of the best and biggest experiments with humanity in terms of the opportunity that our form of government offers . . . it is a very unique position in the world, and I would encourage people to become a part of that." Representative Hesselbein noted the importance of running even if you lose. She said, "I always tell them to absolutely do it. Win or lose. I've won and I've lost, and it's not easy to lose, but it's so worth doing. And I learned so much about myself in the process, even in that failed election." Former Senator Harris Dodd captured all of these sentiments:

Don't underestimate the experiences you've already had, your talents, what you bring to the table. And be unapologetic about it, I guess, is really the word. If I'm going to encompass all that: be unapologetic about wanting to be a woman in politics. It is okay, you're supposed to be here. You deserve to be here. In fact, the legislature is better when women are in the room. When we're here serving our community, we're making such a difference that it's a better place to be, for everybody, whether it's acknowledged or not. Own the space, own the room, be who you are going to be. **BB**