



Experience Counts

Minnesota's Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher has a mile long political résumé that includes time as a legislative staffer.

STORY BY JONATHAN EISENTHAL, PHOTOS BY BOB COLE

When Minnesota Democrats choose Margaret Anderson Kelliher, 38, as speaker earlier this year, they picked an insider. She had experience as a legislative staffer, served on the DFL Caucus Steering Committee, been an assistant minority leader, minority whip and minority leader. She helped recruit candidates, especially women, for the 2006 race that put 29 new DFL members in the House and snatched power back from the GOP.

A farm girl, Speaker Kelliher got an early start in DFL politics as a teenager when she participated in farm rallies at the Capitol in the 1980s. Today, her children Patrick, 13, and Frances, 10, make frequent visits to the Capitol to watch their mother in action.

As presiding officer of the Minnesota House of Representatives, Kelliher performs administrative and procedural

functions of House business. She appoints standing committees, oversees House staff and a \$27 million budget, and provides strategic direction to the Democratic caucus.

Kelliher, who represents Minneapolis, has a reputation for being a good listener. "She leads by listening," and is not threatened by people who disagree with her, said Representative Steve Simon during her nomination for speaker.

"She is very inclusive," says Representative Lyndon Carlson, one of the most senior members of the DFL caucus with 35 years in the House of Representatives. "Speaker Kelliher meets with caucus members frequently. She has a good approach with people. But she can be firm when she needs to be."

Carlson says Kelliher made a real effort to work with the minority party. "Their [the Republicans'] goals were sometimes different from ours, but she did try to reach across the aisle and she was by and large quite successful in doing that."

MARGARET KELLIHER'S DAY

2:30 A.M.

Home to sleep. Five major spending bills remain unresolved. It is one week and counting until the end of the session. (In the last four days Kelliher calculates she's had five hours of sleep, total.)

7:00 A.M.

Husband Dave and mom Elaine Anderson are helping the kids get their day started. Elaine spends much of the session, from January through May, living with her daughter's family, to help life continue on an even keel. Kelliher is up in time to say goodbye to the kids as they head out to the school bus. (Yesterday was a day off from school, so Patrick and Frannie spent the day at the Capitol with the speaker.) Kelliher has a quick cup of coffee with Dave. The couple tries to reserve this time for being together every day, to make sure they see each other at least once in the 24 hours.

8:30 A.M.

The speaker gets into the car for a 25-minute commute to Saint Paul.



9:05 A.M.

Major John Morris, chaplain with the Minnesota National Guard, offers an opening benediction in the House Chambers. Speaker Kelliher has Sam, the young nephew of Republican Representative Paul Kohls, bang the gavel to commence the day's session in the House Chambers. "I enjoy bringing kids to the rostrum and watching how their eyes light up," she says. Procedural business goes on for 20 minutes until the speaker bangs the gavel to recess.

9:25 A.M.

Caucuses meet. In the DFL meeting room, Kelliher addresses the members briefly to give an overall strategy for



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12:45 P.M.

The speaker gets updates from staff and committee chairs about the ongoing negotiations with the governor to deliver spending bills he is willing sign. For the next several hours, meetings with committee chairs continue. The strategy for ending the session on time is rolled out to all the leaders.

1:00 P.M.

The speaker and Majority Leader Sertich walk down the Capitol Mall to the Peace Officers Memorial vigil.

1:30 P.M.

It's back to the State Office Building for dinner brought in

1:00 P.M.

Kelliher gets in the car to drive home. This schedule of long days continued until midnight, May 21, when Speaker Kelliher brought the 2007 session to an end. As it turned out, the governor used his veto power on



the day, to talk about the governor's likely vetoes of the five spending bills and whether they have the 90 votes necessary to override. Of the 134 state representatives, 85 are Democrats. Majority Leader Tony Sertich takes over the meeting and has members stand and speak about bills and amendments that will be dealt with during the day's session. Members frequently direct questions to Kelliher and ask her advice.

Lawrence Pogemiller for an interview on Minnesota Public Radio.

In the studio, she and Pogemiller take calls and answer



questions, in particular about a transportation bill that would add a gasoline sales tax dedicated to road construction and transit needs.

by a staff member. For more than five hours, Kelliher has conversations with House members about bills they are working on and still hoping to pass this session.

transportation and tax bills but signed bills that increased funding for all-day kindergarten and covered more uninsured Minnesota kids with health insurance. The Democrats also realized a major victory in the passage of renewable energy legislation that calls for 25 percent of all energy in the state to come from sources like wind, solar, biofuels and other renewable sources.

10:00 A.M.

A bagpiper and honor guard present the colors in the House Chambers for the Minnesota Peace Officers' Memorial Day.

11:00 A.M.

Kelliher goes to the Capitol radio broadcast studio along with Senate Majority Leader



12:00 P.M.

Ten steps from the radio booth, all of the Twin Cities television and newspaper media conduct an impromptu interview with Kelliher and Pogemiller, grilling them about whether they have the votes to override the expected vetoes on transportation and other spending bills, and whether the situation may lead to a special session.



PITCH IN & DO IT



“In every mistake I try to see the learning opportunity, to figure out how to do something better, how to handle a situation better.”

Minnesota Speaker of the House Margaret Anderson Kelliher

ON WHAT LEADERS NEED

“Leaders need to get perspective and be fully present in the moment. We need to get on the balcony and look at what’s happening. Leading is doing the dance and watching the dance at the same time. It takes a bit of skill and I feel I’m still learning how to do it.”

ON TEAMWORK

“Growing up in a large family and being a parent are advantages in being able to work with groups of people. Having a good team is invaluable, in terms of both staff and the legislators.”

ON THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE

“The challenge is that, as always, resources are limited. It’s also the opportunity. On health care, the decision to focus on children’s health care was an opportunity and a success—though there is still more work to do. Limited resources mean you must make a choice. Twenty years from now, this will be seen as the “energy session,” in which Minnesota retook its

place as a national leader in renewable energy. This year will also be remembered for the Freedom to Breathe Act (banning smoking in almost all indoor non-residential spaces). It will have an important impact on our health care budget 20 years from now.

ON LEADING VS. MANAGING

“When it comes to inspiration vs. perspiration, both are necessary in the legislature. Leading inspires us and helps us all to do a little better. Managing is the hard work. I focus on my own work ethic that comes from my roots growing up on a farm. You either pitch in and do it or you don’t, and I am very much a pitch in and do it kind of person.”

ON LETTING GO

“You need to be realistic. Not everything gets done in one legislative session. In conducting the people’s business, we consult with the executive branch and we make decisions. Letting go means living with the decision that is made.”

MAKING TIME FOR FAMILY

“During the first three months of the session, I see them at the beginning of their day. Evenings are problematic, with committee meetings and evening sessions. Still, I try to break away to get to their sports events. About two weeks from the end of session we resort to modern technology. The kids both have cell phones and they text me. Our sessions are televised, so they watch me on TV and sometimes they will call and tell me they just saw the latest thing I did. That’s an interesting experience.”

FAVORITE LEADER

“Eleanor Roosevelt has been a favorite leader for me, even though she never held an elected position. Her ability to persuade, to lead, to move people in new and different ways, to help people see the world differently—she is personally inspiring to me. I look at her influence in breaking down social barriers, in changing women’s roles in society, and inspiring people—there is a kinship there. Perhaps it’s the idea of the mother as leader that really inspires me.”